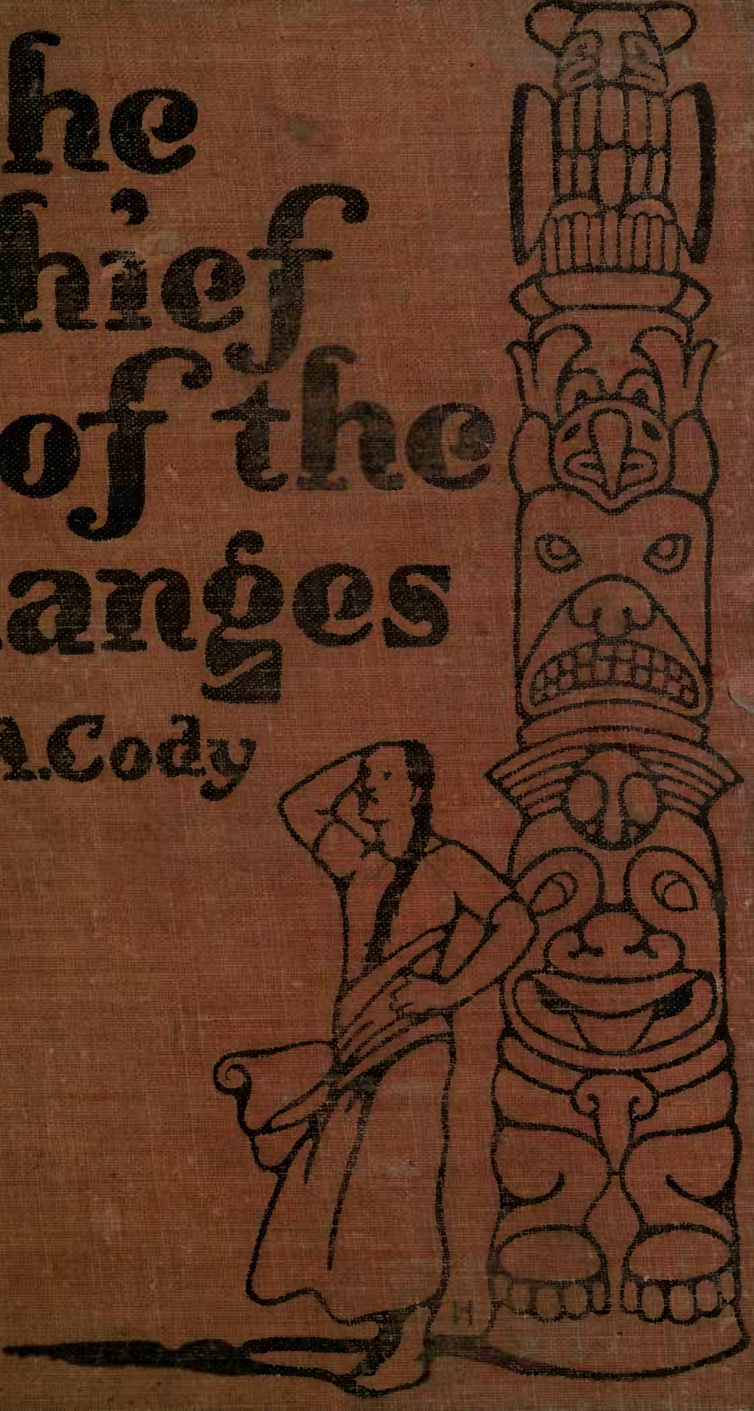
The Chief of the Ranges

H. A. Cody



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THE CHIEF OF THE RANGES

H. A. CODY

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THE CHIEF OF THE RANGES

A TALE OF THE YUKON

BY

H. A. CODY

AUTHOR OF
THE FRONTIERSMAN, UNDER SEALED
ORDERS, THE LONG PATROL, ETC.

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TO
MY FATHER AND MOTHER

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CONTENTS

CHAPTER PAGE

I The Raiders 1
II Foiled 10
III Out of the Storm 21
IV Warning 31
V Secret Depths 42
VI Rejected 51
VII Tokens 65
VIII The Vanguard 73
IX Chivalry 85
X The Pawn in the Game 94
XI Foes Without and Within 106
XII The Messenger 115
XIII A Maiden's Will 124
XIV Captured 134
XV The Spirit of Klota 145
XVI The Voice of the Deceiver 161
XVII In the Forest Depths 174
XVIII Loyalty 188
XIX Shrouded Light 197
XX The Call of the Heart 206
XXI By the Water-Gate 216
XXII Traitors 225
XXIII The Fettered Chief 237
XXIV Out from the Hills 247
XXV Into the Unknown 258
XXVI Regions Beyond 271
XXVII Fort Yukon 280
XXVIII At Last 291

THE CHIEF OF THE RANGES

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CHAPTER I

THE RAIDERS

THE crooked river wound its lazy way between gently shelving banks. The pebbles along the shore sparkled like mirrors beneath the sun's bright rays. The whole land stood agleam on this fair summer afternoon in the far Canadian Northland. Only a gentle whisper rose from the dark forest as the drifting breeze stirred the crests of battalions of rugged spruce and fir trees. The wind, floating along the river and rippling the surface of the water, caused the small canoe lying near the shore to chafe fretfully upon the beach.

Owindia, seated well astern, played one small brown hand in the stream. The breeze, touching her loose dark hair, tossed it over her cheeks and forehead in rich confusion. Listlessly she leaned against the side of the canoe, looking down dreamily into the clear depths beneath.

The river, wind and forest were all like herself — creatures of freedom. She knew them in their days of austerity and coldness as well as in times of peace and repose. In winter and summer, in storm and sunshine, they had always been her companions, and she loved them with the deep affection of her ardent nature.

Of what was she thinking as she sat there in the sunshine, idly dabbling in the water? Was it of some bright event in her young life of sixteen summers? Or was it a vision, lying golden in the far-off future? Perhaps she was thinking of her father and wondering when he would return from the chase. Whatever it was the picture was evidently bright which filled her mind, for occasionally her lips parted in a sweet smile. No sense of fear was hers, and no dark forebodings disturbed her quiet repose. So full of joy had been her life that only the outward aspect had been presented to her view. She knew nothing of the many strange, subtle ways within, of darkness, misery, cruelty, and death. The noble forest on her right was brilliant outwardly, but she could not see within its secret depths, nor through its long, sombre arches. Had it been possible the dreamy expression would have faded from her eyes, and the happy smile would have left her lips. What connection had those crouching forms, slinking beneath the outspreading branches, with the peace of that summer day? The venomous serpent crawling through the tall grass can change in an instant the child's joyous laughter to shrieks of terror.

A slight noise among the trees fell upon Owindia's keen ears, causing her to glance quickly around. Seeing nothing unusual she resumed her former position. It was only a rabbit, no doubt, or a squirrel skurrying along the ground. But her interest had become aroused, and once again her eyes searched the dark recesses. As she did so she leaped to her feet, and stood for an instant with the startled expression of a hunted animal. Then from her lips came a wild cry of alarm, as she sprang from the canoe, and darted rapidly along the shore. Occasionally she glanced back over her shoulder, and each time the sight urged her to greater speed. Yes, they were coming with long swinging lopes. Monsters they seemed to the terrified girl, and when she heard their hideous laughter as they steadily gained upon her a sickening dread possessed her. What had become of that bright sunny face? Where were those dreamy eyes? Surely this was not the maiden who had reclined so gracefully in the canoe but a short time before.

Owindia had rounded a bend now, and there ahead appeared a frail rude lodge. Before it stood a woman, who gazed with wonder upon the wild-eyed girl rushing toward her, and screaming in frenzied tones "Chilcats! Chilcats!" Then she caught sight of the pursuers, and with a cry she started forward, reached the maiden, and enfolded her in her arms. Half carrying and half dragging she hurried Owindia toward the lodge, and had only time to thrust her through the opening used as a door when the two braves leaped upon her and endeavoured to hurl her aside. The woman was aroused to the wildest fury. She struggled and fought with her bare-limbed antagonists. She writhed and twisted in their merciless grasp. Her sharp finger nails left streaming red scars wherever she touched their bodies, and her firm white teeth sank deep into the quivering flesh. She was more than a mere woman now; she was a mother fighting for her only child against the overpowering force of brutal passion.

Leaving his companion to contend alone outside with this fury of a woman, the taller Indian freed himself, entered the lodge, caught Owindia in his arms, and started to make his escape by bursting through the rear of the lodge. From the maiden's lips arose shrieks of the wildest terror, and vainly she endeavoured to tear herself away from her captor. But he held her firm, and smothered her cries by placing one big, dirty hand over her mouth.

No sooner did the mother realise what was taking place within the lodge than she loosened her hold upon her adversary, and sprang to the rescue of her daughter. Owindia's captor saw her coming, and, knowing what a close contact would mean, he gave her a brutal kick as she approached. For an instant the woman struggled to maintain her ground, but her brain reeled, a mist rose before her eyes, and she sank to the earth, striking heavily upon a sharp stone as she fell.

The raiders were now free from this turbulent mother, and a harsh laugh of scorn broke from their lips as they looked upon the prostrate form. No sense of pity stirred their hearts, for was not this woman one of the despised Ayana tribe? But with the girl it was different. She was beautiful, and they needed her.

Owindia no longer struggled, but lay like a crushed flower in those gripping arms. She glanced at her mother lying helplessly before her, and then into the faces of her captors. But no sign of mercy could she detect in their greedy, lustful eyes. No hope could she expect from them. They would carry her away beyond the mountains down to the coast, and what then? Had not her father and mother often told her of the raids the Chilcats had made in days past, when wives and daughters had been ruthlessly snatched away, never more to return to their own people? Had she not pictured it all in her mind — the terror, despair and the long years of heart-breaking life among that ferocious tribe? Had she not at times, even as a child, started up in alarm in the dead of night thinking the Chilcats were upon her? And now it had come to pass. It was no longer a dream, but a terrible reality.

With their precious booty thus secured, the Chilcats turned toward the silent forest at their back. They had taken but a few steps forward when out from amid the trees leaped a gigantic native, and with a wild cry of rage and bereavement rushed toward the raiders. The Indian bearing the maiden dropped his burden upon the ground, and endeavoured to seize the small hatchet hanging at his waist. His efforts were in vain, for the next instant he was stretched full length upon the earth, with his thick skull shattered by a blow that would have rent a rock in twain. His companion, by a tremendous sideward bound, escaped a like fate and sped off nimbly into the forest, and escaped from view.

The victor did not attempt to follow the retreating Chilcat, but stood like a statue over his fallen victim. A rage, wild and ungoverned, possessed his soul. His eyes gleamed with the fury of a lioness bereft of her cubs. His great breast lifted and fell, telling plainly of the storm raging within. The muscles of his long tense right arm stood out like cords of thrice-twisted hemp. With a grip of steel his fingers clutched the haft of his hunting axe. At his feet lay the dead Chilcat. What did it matter that life was extinct in that prostrate form? He was of the hated race, the people who for long years had been grinding down the Ayana. It was something to have even one of their dead so near him now. Lifting high his axe he smote again and again that quivering body. His fury increased at every stroke. It was not one Chilcat he was smiting, but the whole race. He paused at length and looked around as if expecting enemies from every quarter. He glanced toward the forest and the shore, and at last beheld his daughter crouched upon the ground a few paces away. In her eyes was a new expression of fear. She could not understand her father's terrible action. Never before had she witnessed a scene like this; death and such boundless fury. It could not be her father, Klitonda, the brave chief of the Ayana. And even as the giant looked upon his daughter his arm relaxed and a somewhat softer light came into his eyes. He crossed to where she was crouching and laid his hand upon her shoulder. She shrank away at the touch, gentle though it was, while a low moan escaped her lips. Presently she looked up. Her father had moved away, and was kneeling by the side of the prostrate woman, scanning her face and speaking to her.

"Klota, Klota," he called, "Klitonda has come. He is here."

Quickly Owindia rose to her feet and hurried to where her father was kneeling. So great had been her terror that she had scarcely thought of her mother. But now she realised that something was wrong. Seeing her mother huddled there, so still and death-like, with a gurgling cry she dropped by her side and peered into those staring eyes, and softly stroked the face so dear to her.

"Mother, mother!" she wailed, "speak to Owindia. Don't look that way. Don't!"

Then something arrested her attention, which made her heart almost stop its beating. It was the slow trickle of a tiny red stream, oozing out from the jet black hair of the unconscious woman, and mingling with the sand.

"It's blood! It's blood!" she cried, lifting her startled eyes to her father's face. "The Chilcats have killed her! Oh-o-o-o!"

Klitonda was himself once more. No longer was his rage expressed in outward action. It was like the silent, pent-up force of the concealed mine, only waiting the right moment to burst forth in appalling destruction. Gathering his wife tenderly in his strong arms he carried her swiftly to the lodge, and laid her gently upon a bed of soft furs. Well did he know that she would never look at him again, never speak to him more. Picking up a dressed deer-skin lying near he drew it over Klota's stiffening body. He paused for a moment ere shrouding her face. A slight chain of gold encircled the woman's neck, supporting a small locket concealed beneath her dress. This he unfastened, and handed it to Owindia.

"Wear it, child," he said; "it was your mother's."

The long day waned, and night at length shut down chilly over the land. A fitful breeze rippled the river's surface, and stirred the tops of the pointed trees. It moaned around the lodge wherein lay Owindia upon her bed of skins of wild animals. Her black hair fell around her drawn, tear-stained face. The light from the fire outside illumined the interior of the humble abode. It threw into clear relief the graceful form of the sleeping maiden and the contour of her shrouded mother not far away.

By the burning logs crouched Klitonda. No sleep came to his eyes. He gazed down silently into the red hot embers, as if fascinated by their fiery glow. But hotter and more terrible was the fire surging within the breast of this outraged chief. Once he straightened himself up, turned partly around, and threw out a hard clenched fist toward the great Chilcoot range of mountains lying away to the westward. Such action was more eloquent than many words. It was a symbol, the outward and visible sign of a mighty inward resolve.

CHAPTER II

FOILED

STEEP wooded banks lined both sides of the Yukon River for many miles. On one of the highest hills stood Klitonda, keenly watching the crooked stream as it wound like a silver thread through its setting of dark green trees. He might have been a stump, for not the slightest movement did he make.

Far away in the distance toward the left his eyes were resting upon two specks gliding steadily up stream. That they were Chilcat traders and plunderers he was well aware. As he looked his right hand closed fiercely upon the stout bow which only his arm could bend to its full capacity. The day was cool, and a keen wind careening over the land presaged a coming storm. But Klitonda heeded it not.

Since that terrible night, over a year before, when he had watched the burning embers in front of the lodge wherein his wife was lying cold in death, the fire raging within his heart had not subsided. Time had only added fuel, and a deeper intensity to the flames. The Chilcats had vowed revenge for the brave who had been slain. "Blood for blood" was their cry, and they had mercilessly hunted Klitonda from place to place. They had threatened to exterminate the whole Ayana tribe if the chief were not delivered into their hands. But this threat had never been carried out, for the Chilcats could not well afford to slaughter the hunters and trappers who supplied them so regularly with an abundance of game and valuable furs.

But Klitonda had not been idle. He had roamed the land like a weird spectre, appearing suddenly in the most unlikely places, and at times when least expected. He had visited every band of his scattered flock by river, lake, and in forest depths. Wherever a camp fire had been lighted there Klitonda's voice had been heard, pleading with his people, and urging them to arouse to action and drive back the haughty, insulting Chilcats beyond the mountain ranges. But his efforts seemed all in vain. A spirit of base fear pervaded the hearts of even the lustiest of the warriors. They had been too terribly crushed and held in subjection so long to be stirred easily to action. The old men and women who had survived that slaughtering carnage had passed away, but not without instilling into the breasts of their children their own o'erwhelming dread of that cruel coast tribe.

With Klitonda it was different. Fear to him was unknown, and he despised the cringing spirit of his people. Two forces now governed his very being: one, the love he bore to his only child, Owindia; the other, the hatred to the Chilcats, and his determination to free the land from their dominating sway. So on this late fall afternoon as he watched the two canoes out upon the river an almost overpowering passion possessed his soul. This was due to the visit he had just made to his wife's grave near at hand. He had not previously returned to the place since he had borne her body up that steep hill over twelve months before. But the longing had been strong within his heart to look upon the spot where she was lying. And so he had come back, and had stood for a long time by the lonely mound upon the hilltop.

Having watched the advancing canoes until the trees along the shore hid them from view, Klitonda left the summit and glided swiftly down through the forest toward the river. Ere long he moved more cautiously, and at length coming to the brow of the bank he dropped upon his knees, and crept warily forward. Under the shelter of a small thick fir tree he paused and from his place of concealment he was able to obtain an excellent view of all that took place below. He could see that the Chilcats had landed, and were bartering with a number of Ayana Indians encamped at that very place. Klitonda well knew that moose meat and skins were being exchanged for trinkets of little value. In fact the Chilcats set the price, and if they had nothing to give would always take what they wanted as a matter of course.

Klitonda breathed hard, and his dusky face grew darker than ever as he watched the unscrupulous barter. How he longed to leap down the hill and meet those plunderers face to face. He believed he would be a match for all of them, even though they were ten to one. But he well knew that such an act would be useless. Nothing would be gained. Only by the united efforts of the Ayana could anything of a definite nature be accomplished.

Presently an expression of anxiety came into Klitonda's eyes. For a while he remained lost in thought. His mind turned toward his daughter whom he had left that morning in a temporary lodge farther upstream. The Chilcats would pass that way, and he must get there first. It would not do for those human wolves to see Owindia.

Slipping quietly back from the brow of the hill until he had gained the safety of the forest, he sped with nimble feet among the trees. No trail marked the way, and Klitonda needed none. He was as certain of his steps as if he walked on a well-beaten road. Ere long the river appeared to view, and warily approaching the shore he looked carefully up and down the stream. Then drawing a small dug-out canoe from a concealed place he pushed it gently into the water and stepped in. Seizing one of the two paddles lying in the bottom he sent the rocking craft speeding on its way. The wind was in his teeth, blowing strong and keen from the great lake two miles beyond.

Klitonda had gone but a short distance, when, happening to look back, he saw the two canoes of the Chilcats rounding a bend in the river several hundred yards behind. They had evidently caught sight of the craft ahead, and were bending strongly to their paddles in an effort to overtake the lone voyager.

The sight of his pursuers affected Klitonda like magic. With a jerk he settled himself into a better position, and drove the blade of his polished paddle into the cold water with a sudden swish. The canoe responded like a thing of life, and bounded forward as if eager to do its master's bidding. Only occasionally did Klitonda glance back, and each time he noticed that the Chilcats were steadily gaining. There were ten of them, and each wielded a paddle.

The current was now swift and Klitonda was compelled at times to keep close to the shore. Eagerly he looked ahead and at length saw far beyond the faint outline of the lodge he had recently erected. The sight lent new strength to his arms. He must reach the place before his pursuers overtook him. Soon the rain, which had been threatening for some time, met him. It drove lashingly into his face, impelled by the ever increasing wind. But neither rain, wind nor current could stay the onward rush of that trim little craft. The paddle bent beneath Klitonda's tremendous sweep. He felt that the Chilcats were not far behind, but he could not afford to turn around even for one fleeting glance. His eyes were constantly fixed upon the lodge ahead, which was now becoming quite distinct. He watched for Owindia as he approached. Would she be near the shore, waiting his return, or had she strolled off into the forest a short distance as was sometimes her custom?

Nearer and nearer swept the canoe. He could see the opening of the lodge, but no one was in sight; all was in silence about the place. A few more mighty strokes, and then a wild, piercing whoop broke from his lips. It was answered by yells of derision from the pursuing Chilcats. They knew the man now as the outcast chief whom they longed to capture. He could not escape them they felt sure, and what could one man do, armed only with bow and arrows, against their fire-vomiting guns? They would take him alive, if possible, in triumph back to the coast. And his daughter — they saw her emerge from the lodge — would be theirs, too. There was not a Chilcat but had heard of her remarkable beauty, and longed to possess her as his own.

Owindia comprehended the whole situation at a glance. With her to think was to act, so hurrying forward she reached the shore just as Klitonda ran the canoe alongside. Words were unnecessary, and as Owindia stepped lightly and quickly aboard, she seized the unused paddle, dropped upon her knees, and began to assist her father. They were now close to the large lake, and the swells rolling in through the narrow channel ahead gave evidence of the roughness of the water beyond. But not for an instant did Klitonda hesitate. Pointing the canoe for the opening it bounded forward as if anxious to do battle with the tempest outside. The white-capped waves rushed to meet it; the spray dashed over the bow at each headlong plunge, and the racing wind strove to turn it from its course.

Klitonda steered straight for the open. Owindia's lithe form bent and swayed at each dip of her paddle. No word was spoken, for father and daughter realised the seriousness of their position. Both knew what fearful odds they were facing. It seemed the wildest folly to attempt to run over that lake in such a frail craft. But better far to brave the fury of the elements than to fall into the hands of their pursuers. With the former there was the possible chance of mercy and escape; with the latter none.

Klitonda did not believe that the Chilcats would attempt the pursuit across the lake. Great was his surprise, therefore, when glancing back he saw that they were holding firmly to their course. So set were they upon making the capture that their inborn discretion was for the time overcome by the spirit of rashness. Where such a small canoe could go they could follow, so they fondly imagined. But they forgot how heavily their crafts were freighted, not only with the men, but also with the large supply of moose meat they had obtained down the river. At first the canoes were able to stem the waves which beat against their bows. They rent them asunder and threw them easily aside. At length, however, the waves became larger and as the curling whitecaps reared up angrily in front, the canoes plunged heavily and began to ship water. Seeing this the Chilcats realised their imminent danger, and in a moment of panic swung the canoes to the left as if to make for the shore. It proved a fatal mistake, for the next oncoming wave broke right over them, completely swamping both canoes. In an instant the ten Chilcats were struggling desperately in the icy water. They were all good swimmers, and at once struck out for the land. But their efforts were in vain, and soon the last had disappeared beneath the surface of that rough inland lake.

When Klitonda saw what had happened, a grim triumph shone in his clear dark eyes. He spoke a few words to Owindia, who drawing in her paddle turned herself deftly about in the canoe. Klitonda did the same, and soon they were driving before the wind back over the very course they had just taken. Night had shut down dark and cold by the time they reached smoother water, and passed down the narrow channel. Soon they were before their own lodge, and the canoe drawn well up on the shore. Then a fire was lighted, and supper prepared.

Klitonda sat that evening by the fire, while Owindia lay on several skins just within the door of the lodge. The bright light fell upon her strongly moulded face, and played with her dark hair. Her eyes were gazing dreamily before her, out upon the leaping flames. Occasionally Klitonda looked in her direction and his eyes were full of tenderness.

"I nearly lost you to-night, little one," he began. "Things looked very bad for a time."

"Oh, it was terrible!" and Owindia clasped her hands before her as she replied, while a slight shiver shook her body. "When will we be safe from the cruel Chilcats? Why do they hunt us all the time? Why can't they leave us alone?"

"They will never do that, child, until our people make up their minds to drive them back beyond the mountains of the setting sun, and I fear that will not be for some time. I am dreading the outcome of the death of those ten men to-night."

"In what way, father?"

"The Chilcats will think that the Ayana killed them, and they may come in great numbers to seek revenge. Anyway no matter what happens we are never safe. They hate me because I have always opposed them, and have been trying to stir up our people against them. And they want you because you are so beautiful. I understand there is great rivalry among the coast Indians over you. The chief's son, a very determined man, has made up his mind to have you as his wife. Oh, little one, my heart is sore all the time. I am ever thinking how those wolves are trying to steal you away. How could I live without you? Since your dear mother died you have been my only comfort."

"But why should the chief's son want me, father?" Owindia replied. "There must be many women along the coast more pleasing than I am."

"But you are different from them, child. You know that yourself. There is white blood in your veins, and your mother taught you many things which the coast women do not know."

"Yes, father, my mother taught me much, and I have forgotten nothing. I think over everything day and night. I would die rather than be the wife of a Chilcat brave, even though he were the chief's son. There is something here, father," and she placed her hand upon her breast, "which gives me no peace. It is like a voice telling me of a life different from this such as we are living. My mother often told me about the wonderful things beyond the great mountains of the rising sun, where there are no cruel Chilcats; where people live in lodges so different from ours, and know, oh, so many things. And she told me something else, father."

"What is it, little one?"

"She said that there were no medicine men out there; that the white people believed in the Great Father who cares for each one. She told me many beautiful stories about Him, and I remember them all."

For a time Klitonda did not speak, but gazed thoughtfully into the fire. This noted hunter and dreaded warrior was now as quiet as a little child. Years before the tiny seed of a new power had entered his heart. It had been slowly growing, and was steadily contending with his wild savage nature.

"Your mother often told me about the wonderful ways of the white people," he after a while began. "She taught me many things, and I have always wanted our own race to understand the feeling that is in my heart. Why do we ever remain the same? We are no better than our fathers and forefathers. They hunted, fished, trapped and fought. We are doing the same. This land is ours, and has been ours for ages. Shall we let the Chilcats have it, or shall we drive them back, and learn the secret of the ways of the white people? I cannot tell all that's in my heart and mind, but I see and hear things, and when I try to tell them to my people they shake their heads, and think there is something wrong with me."

Klitonda rose slowly to his feet, and stood erect before the fire. His gaunt face was drawn and tense, and in his eyes dwelt a wistful, yearning expression.

"Little one," and he looked down earnestly upon his daughter as he spoke, "I have a strange feeling to-night. Something tells me that we are soon to break the influence of the Chilcats over this land. I see a new power coming to our aid, though I cannot tell what it is. My heart is much lighter than it has been for months. We must get away from here, for we are never safe so close to the coast. Sleep now, Owindia, for we must leave very early in the morning."

CHAPTER III

OUT OF THE STORM

THERE was snow everywhere. The air was full of it. It had been falling for hours. The wind raced howling over the land, tossing the tree tops in swirling confusion. Klitonda was late, and the soft snow impeded his progress. The small sled he was drawing was well loaded with game he had taken from his traps. He had not expected such a storm when he started from his lodge early that morning. There was not a cloud to be seen then, and the sun was bright above the horizon. But the sky had suddenly darkened, and the tempest had burst upon him when he was miles from home. He had crossed lakes and wild meadows where he could hardly see two rods ahead of him. But he knew his course, and kept steadily on.

He was in the shelter of the forest now where the wind could not worry him, and a little farther on stood his snug winter abode. He was thinking deeply as he plodded forward, though at times he cast furtive glances among the trees as if expecting someone to emerge from their secret depths. He had met a trapper of his own tribe that morning who had imparted to him disquieting news. The Chilcats, so he was told, were preparing to cross the mountains when the winter was over. They were to come in great numbers to demand compensation for the ten traders who had lost their lives the preceding fall. They believed that they had been slain by the Ayana Indians, and would listen to no word of explanation. Besides heavy payments of valuable furs, it was rumoured that they were to demand the persons of Klitonda and his daughter. If their requests were not granted they would wage a merciless war, wipe the Ayana people out of existence, and do all the hunting and trapping themselves. Already there were Chilcat runners in the country who were spying out the various bands, and seeking to ascertain where the chief and his daughter were passing the winter. Such stories were in circulation throughout the country, losing nothing in their transmission from band to band.

Although Klitonda was well aware how prone his people were to exaggerate such tales, and at times to make out matters really worse than they were, he felt, nevertheless, there must be some truth at the bottom of such reports. He had fully expected that the Chilcats would bestir themselves over the death of the ten braves, and had often wondered what course of action they would take to obtain satisfaction.

He was thinking seriously over what he had heard as he pressed steadily forward through the storm on this late mid-winter afternoon. His alert attitude, and the restless roving of his eyes among the trees plainly showed that the stories were not without their effect. He longed to catch sight of the runners now. There would be no more prowling around his lodge.

At length he came to a sudden standstill, and gazed down intently upon the snow. There before him were snow-shoe tracks recently made. From the impressions left Klitonda knew that it was not one of his own tribe who had passed that way. It must have been a stranger, and who else would be prowling around in such a storm but one of the Chilcat spies?

Dropping the cord of his sled the chief unslung the bow from off his back, drew forth a sharp pointed arrow from the moose-hide quiver, and looked keenly ahead. Then he started cautiously forward upon the trail of the unknown traveller. As he advanced he noted that the marks in the snow became more crooked, and it seemed as if the person who made them was staggering heavily. In one place he saw where he had evidently fallen, and only after a struggle had regained his feet. Henceforth the tracks were more zig-zag than ever. Wondering as to the meaning of it all Klitonda now stepped on more rapidly, and soon through the storm he caught a glimpse of a reeling figure some distance beyond. That he was a Chilcat he had not the slightest doubt, and his one desire was to approach quietly and dispatch him as quickly as possible. No feeling of pity stirred Klitonda's heart at the sight of the unfortunate man lost in such a storm. He was a spy, his merciless enemy who had come to seek him out.

The staggering man never once looked back. His head was bent forward, and he seemed to be groping his way as if in the darkest night. Klitonda had the arrow fitted to the string, and was about to draw it full to the head when the stranger, with a pitiful cry of despair, threw up his hands, and fell full length upon his face in the soft yielding snow. Seeing that he did not move, or make any attempt to rise, Klitonda stepped warily toward him, still keeping the bow and arrow in readiness for any sudden emergency. When a few feet from where the fallen man was lying he paused and studied him most carefully. Then he stepped nearer and peered down close in an effort to obtain a view of the man's face. Next he laid aside his bow and arrow, seized the man and turned him over upon his back. As he did so a grunt of surprise escaped Klitonda's lips. He was not a Chilcat spy, but one of another race, a white man. Klitonda did not begin to conjecture as to the purpose of the stranger's visit. It was sufficient for the present to know that the man was not a Chilcat enemy. For the whites he had the greatest respect and admiration. White blood had flowed in the veins of his own dead wife, and for her sake, at least, he must be good to this wayfarer.

Stooping, he lifted the unconscious man in his arms, and retraced his steps over the trail he had just traversed. It was no light burden he bore, but a dead weight of not less than one hundred and seventy pounds. Reaching the place where he had left the sled, Klitonda turned somewhat to the left, and plunged rapidly forward. Every moment was precious. Night was shutting down early, and the storm showed no sign of abatement. But not once did Klitonda hesitate as to the course he was to pursue, and ere long a log cabin loomed up suddenly out of the storm a few rods ahead. Several long strides brought him to the building. Then kicking off his snow-shoes, he drew aside a deer skin flap hanging over an opening, and entered. As he did so a draught of cold air rushed through, and vigorously fanned the fire burning brightly within.

This structure was a typical Indian abode, erected for winter use. It was stoutly made and had the appearance of having been pulled apart, leaving an open scope several feet wide in the middle. This latter was the place for the fire, the smoke escaping through the large opening overhead. At the sides, where the logs were parted, were deer-skin hangings which kept out the wind and the cold. The space on each side of the fire was as cozy and comfortable as fir boughs and skins could make it. From a kettle, resting close to the red hot embers, drifted the appetising smell of cooking meat. The interior was bright and warm, a pleasing contrast to the raging of the elements outside.

But brighter than all else within that lodge was

Owindia, as she sat on a large soft bear skin, her fingers busily engaged upon a piece of beaded-work. Her black hair was smoothed back over her broad though not high forehead. Her dress of the softest and finest of native tanned deer skin fitted perfectly her lithe form. Around her neck hung the slender chain, with locket attached, which had once belonged to her mother.

Something, however, had been disturbing Owindia's peace of mind this evening. In her eyes dwelt an expression of anxiety, and at every violent gust of wind she would pause and listen intently. When the deer-skin flaps shook more than usual she always gave a distinct start. Why was her father so long in coming? she wondered. Had something happened to him? Since the day of her mother's death she had never felt safe when left alone. She imagined that the Chilcats were prowling around, trying to steal her away. This feeling was greatly intensified whenever a storm was sweeping over the land.

A bright smile illumined her face, and the anxious look faded from her eyes when at last she heard her father approach, draw back the flap to the right, and enter. But when she saw the limp form in his arms she gave a slight cry of surprise, sprang lightly to her feet, and hastened to his side.

Carefully Klitonda laid the unconscious man near the fire, and in a few words explained to his daughter his experience that afternoon.

"He is a white man, little one," he said in conclusion, "and for your mother's sake we must take good care of him."

Owindia needed no urging to arouse her to action. The sight of the quiet man lying before her with closed eyes and drawn white face, touched her heart with the deepest pity. He was a young man, tall and powerfully built, she could tell at a glance. Removing his fur-lined parka she at once began to chafe his cold numb hands. Then going to the kettle steaming near the fire, she brought a hot drink in a small cup, and with her father's aid forced some of the nourishing broth between the firmly-set teeth. Ere long the warmth of the fire and the drink he had taken revived the stranger. Opening his eyes he looked about him in a vacant manner. Then with a deep sigh he closed them again, and drifted off into a natural slumber.

After Klitonda had eaten his supper he donned his cap and mittens.

"I am going back for my sled, little one," he said. "I left it only a short distance away, so it will not take me long. It is not safe to leave it out there."

He did not notice the look of fear which leaped into his daughter's face at these words. She said nothing, however, but having watched her father leave the lodge she went back to her beaded-work. But her fingers were not busy now. She picked up the jacket, only to let it drop again into her lap. She found it impossible to keep her eyes away from the sleeping man. Who was he? she wondered, and what was he doing so far on this side of the mountains? His face was different from any she had ever seen, and his hair was not long, black and straight, but dark brown, and curling over his forehead. She had caught one glimpse of his eyes when he had opened them and looked vacantly around. She should like to see them again, to notice their colour. Then she drifted off into a world of fancy. Were all white people beyond the mountains of the rising sun like this one? How much he must know. Had he a home, and if so why did he leave it? Was someone waiting for him to return? How long would he stay at the lodge, and would he go away again, and she would never see him more?

Although the most beautiful flower of all the maidens in the Yukon region Owindia had never been wooed. There was not a brave in the whole land but longed to take her to his lodge as wife, and would have fought and even died for her sake. Her presence in any camp always caused a flutter of excitement, and a stirring of dusky hearts. How the striplings vied with one another in waiting upon her every want. And in their various games of wrestling, running and jumping, the victors always turned to the chief's daughter for signs of special favour. But Owindia favoured none of them. Although kind and friendly to all there was a barrier, a certain reserve, which always checked the most impetuous, and love-smitten braves, and kept them at a respectable distance.

Combined with her father's strong and independent spirit, there were her mother's powerful influence and careful teaching. Klitonda's dissatisfaction with the life of his people, and his yearning for nobler things sank deep in his daughter's soul. She knew what it meant to be an Ayana Indian wife. Had she not too often seen the life the women led? It was to be a mere drudge, to bear children, and to be an abject slave to her imperious lord and master. So much had her mother told her about the wonderful things beyond the great mountains of the rising sun that Owindia held the white race to be little less than divine. Was not her mother part white? she oftened reasoned with herself, and if she knew so much, and was so good what must the people be like who had all white blood in their veins?

Once her mother had playfully told her that a white brave would come for her, take her away, and she would see the marvellous things for herself. These words spoken so lightly had remained in Owindia's mind. How real the world of fancy and romance had become to her, and often she pictured her hero coming to meet her just as her mother had said.

For a while she forgot the storm and the dark night as she sat before the fire. Her eyes were looking straight before her, but they dwelt upon nothing near; they only saw things far off and rosy. A movement of the lodge flap to the right attracted her attention. How hard the wind was blowing, she thought, and she glanced around to be sure that the hanging was well secured at the top. It sometimes got loose if neglected. To-night no such thing must happen. The lodge must be kept warm on account of the sleeping man.

As she looked her face underwent a marvellous transformation. Terror filled her eyes; wild fear blanched her cheeks; a numbing sensation almost paralysed her body. She could neither speak nor move. She could only look with eyes that never winked upon that horrible face peering in through the partly withdrawn flap. Great glaring greedy eyes gloated over her; they roved around the interior of the lodge, and rested at last upon the sleeping man. To Owindia it seemed an age that the terrible visage confronted her, ere at length it was withdrawn, and the flap dropped back into its place. Then silence reigned, save for the roaring of the wind, the crackling of the fire, and the wild beating of Owindia's heart.

CHAPTER IV

WARNING

WHEN Klitonda returned to his lodge he kicked off his snow-shoes, drew back the flap, and entered. He paused abruptly and looked with astonishment into his daughter's face.

"What's wrong, little one?" he demanded.

But Owindia did not reply. She only sat rigid, upright, and wide-eyed, staring straight before her.

"Child, child, what is it?" her father insisted, stepping forward and laying his big right hand upon her shoulder.

The touch aroused her, and brought her somewhat to her senses.

"There, there!" she gasped, pointing with her finger to the deer-skin hanging.

"What do you mean?" replied her father, following the direction of her extended arm.

"Didn't you see it?" she queried. "A face, oh, so terrible, looking in upon me out of the night! You must have seen it, for it disappeared just before you came."

"You must have been mistaken, little one. You have been dreaming. It was the wind, and the movement of the flap."

"No, no! It was a face, with horrible greedy eyes — eyes like the ones which looked at me the night my mother died. I was not mistaken."

Across Klitonda's face swept a dark scowl, and an angry growl escaped his lips. He knew now that Owindia's fear was real. He thought of what he had heard that morning about the Chilcat spies. Quickly he wheeled and left the lodge. He was gone only a short time, when he returned and shook the snow from his body.

"No use," he muttered. "It is too dark to follow the tracks. It is just like the Chilcats to choose such a night as this. We are never safe, little one."

"And you think it was a Chilcat, father? Are you sure now that I was not mistaken; that my eyes did not deceive me?"

"No, child, you were not mistaken. I heard to-day that Chilcat runners are in the land spying us out."

A tremor shook the girl's body as she listened, and drawing close to her father's side she put her hand in his.

"Don't leave me again," she pleaded. "Whenever you go away they come. Let me always go with you, no matter how hard the trail may be. I shall go mad if I have to stay alone after what I have endured to-night."

"Very well, little one," was the reply. "Don't worry over it now. A good sleep will do you much good."

Owindia, however, found it hard to follow her father's advice. The hours passed, and the fire burned low. But sleep would not come to her eyes. The storm still raged with unabated fury. Every time the flap moved she imagined she saw that horrible face looking in upon her. When toward morning she did sink into a fitful slumber she was beset by cruel Chilcats, who were leering upon her with merciless eyes. Then a form bounded to her rescue, drove back her assailants, seized her in his arms, and bore her away. She caught one fleeting glimpse of her rescuer ere the vision faded — it was the face of the white stranger.

With the light of day courage returned to Owindia's heart. The fearful scene of the past night was like a horrible dream. Her face was somewhat pale, and a certain listlessness possessed her which she could not overcome. The presence of the white man kept her from brooding over her fears.

The stranger of the storm, much refreshed after his long sleep, opened his eyes and looked around the lodge in astonishment. His last remembrance was of staggering through the forest, battling with the storm, and trying to urge his weary, over-taxed body forward. How had he come to this place? he wondered. Who had rescued him? It did not concern him much, however, for the bed was comfortable, and his eyes were fixed upon a bright scene on the other side of the fire. It seemed like fairy-land to lie there listening to the crackling of the fire, and watching that graceful form now standing erect, and again bending over something which he could not see. Where had such a beautiful creature come from? She surely did not belong to the wilderness. A form such as hers, clad in a neatly fitting dress, soft and clean, he had not expected to find in this far-off Yukon region. And the poise of her head held him spellbound by its every movement. Presently she turned, looked straight toward him, and their eyes met. It was only for an instant, but that glance was sufficient to stir the stranger's heart to its inmost depth.

Never before had he been thus affected by such eyes. They were different from any he had ever seen, so full of tenderness, mingled with sadness were they. A secret fear, as of a hunted animal lurked within their clear orbs. They were eyes which roused in the soul a longing for action, a desire to do something which would cause them to glow with pleasure and pride. The quick glance which had met the stranger's was a questioning one. "Are you worthy to be trusted?" it seemed to say. And in fact the young man wanted to feel that he could be trusted. He could not describe the sensation which came to him now; he had never experienced the like before. To a man whose life had been a roving one full of adventure, it was certainly new to be captivated by a pair of eyes. But in that brief space of time, with not even a word spoken he knew that, for him, life would never be the same again.

There was something more to live for than the chase, and no matter where he went those sad dark eyes would ever be with him.

For some time he remained in his recumbent position satisfied to watch her helping her father. The latter was skinning the game he had taken from his traps the day before and Owindia was assisting. There were various animals, fox, lynx, wolverine, and marten, for Klitonda had made a good catch. Owindia was stretching the pelts, and the stranger noticed how deftly she did the work. His eyes roamed from the skins near the fire to the many hanging upon the walls of the lodge. There were fine beaver pelts, and black fox skins, too, of rare quality. With the eyes of a connoisseur he noted them all, and conjectured their various values when laid down in London. And this was only one lodge. There must be hundreds more, he felt confident, each with as rich a supply as this. What prizes he had found here in the wilderness, furs to satisfy the heart of the keenest trader, and a maiden, whose presence stirred his very soul. His weariness and lassitude had left him now. He sat bolt upright that he might obtain a better view of the skins hanging around him. How much would the Indian ask for them? he wondered, or were they already spoken for by some native trader? He did not believe that there were other white men in the country, but he had heard that the coast Indians crossed the mountains, and did considerable bartering. He knew next to nothing about the Chilcats, and had yet to learn the history of that rapacious tribe. He was the trader once more. Keenness mingled with caution, and a smile of satisfaction lurked about the corners of his mouth as he thought of the favourable report he would make upon his return down river.

Owindia, seeing the stranger sitting up, went to the fire, lifted the cover from a kettle, and taking a spoon, artistically made from the horn of a mountain sheep, began to dip out some of the rich broth into a small wooden vessel. This done, she brought it to the white man's side, and without a word held it out for him to take. The stranger was hungry, and he drank eagerly, at the same time noticing how small were the nut-brown hands of the maiden standing before him. Next she brought him a piece of well-cooked moose meat, and the relish with which he ate brought an expression of satisfaction to her face.

"Is the white man better now?"

They were the first words she had uttered, and the stranger was surprised at the soft tone of her voice. He was delighted, too, to find that he could understand her language, which was little different from that he was in the habit of speaking.

"I feel quite well," he replied. "You are very kind to me. But please tell me how I came here. I was battling through the storm, I fell and knew no more until I awoke and found myself in this lodge."

"It was my father who saved you," Owindia replied, while a smile illumined her face.

"And is that your father over there?"

"Ah, ah."

"And what is his name?"

"Klitonda."

"What! Klitonda, chief of the Ayana?"

"Ah, ah."

"And your name?"

"Owindia."

"Owindia; how pretty. I like it. Do you wish to know mine?"

"Ah, ah."

"Natsatt is my name."

"I like it," was the shy reply. "It is different from any I ever heard."

Klitonda in the meantime had finished his work, and had taken his place near where the white man was sitting. His face brightened as he listened to the conversation, for it always pleased him to see Owindia happy. Something about the stranger attracted him. He liked his face; it was candid and open. Klitonda was a good judge of character. He could read men like an open book, and had a name for each. He could detect the wolf, bear, or fox nature in a short time.

"I want to thank you for your kindness to me," and Natsatt turned toward the chief as he spoke. "But for you I should have perished out there in the storm."

"The white man is welcome to Klitonda's lodge," was the quiet reply. "Klitonda's heart is always warm to the great race beyond the mountains of the rising sun."

"You have traded with them, then?" Natsatt somewhat anxiously queried. "They have been here buying your skins?"

"Klitonda's wife was born there. Klota's father was a white man."

"Oh, I see," and a surprised look came into Natsatt's eyes. Then he looked at Owindia and light began to dawn upon his mind. Here was the reason why she was so different from other Indian women he had met. There was white blood in her veins.

"And your wife is dead?" he questioned.

"Ah, ah. Dead."

The pathos in Klitonda's voice, and the pained expression upon his face, deterred Natsatt from inquiring further.

"Do the white traders come here now?" he asked.

The chief shook his head.

"No, the white men have never traded here."

"But where do you sell your furs?"

"To the Chilcat wolves," and Klitonda's voice hardened. "They come here; they rob the Ayana. They are bad, ugh!"

"But why do you trade with them?"

"Where else can the Ayana trade? What can they do with their skins?"

"Will the Chilcats get all these?" and Natsatt pointed to the furs hanging on the walls.

"No!" Klitonda replied, clenching his hands fiercely together. "No Chilcat gets these skins."

"But what will you do with them?"

"Klitonda will cross the great mountains. He will find the white traders."

"Did you ever go there before?"

"No."

"And will other hunters take their skins there, too?"

"No; they fear the Chilcats."

"But would they trade with the white men if they came into your country? Would they bring their furs to the white man's store?"

To this Klitonda did not at once reply. He seemed to be thinking deeply. A new idea had entered his mind. Would the white traders come? Would they buy the furs, and would they help to drive back the Chilcats beyond the coast range? Then he thought of the anger of the Chilcats should the white men enter the land, and begin trading with the Ayana. There would be trouble, he felt sure of that.

"It would not be safe for the white men to come," he at length remarked. "The Chilcat wolves would be angry; they would come in great force, and kill them."

"You think so?" Natsatt questioned.

"Ah, ah. Klitonda knows what the Chilcats would do."

"But the white men have come. They have built a Post at the mouth of the Segas River. They have goods, and will trade with the Ayana. They will give fair prices for their skins."

Klitonda started at these words, and looked keenly into Natsatt's face.

"Does the white man speak true?" he demanded. "Does he mean all he says?"

"Yes, yes; it is true. The Post has been built, and the white men are there. I was sent out with another trader to visit some of the Indian camps, to invite them to bring their furs to the Post. My companion went more to the right, while I followed the river and got lost in the storm. I hope nothing has happened to him."

Slowly Klitonda shook his head.

"Let the white men beware," he replied. "The Chilcats are fierce."

And yet within his own heart Klitonda rejoiced at what he had just heard. He himself could take his furs to the white men, and he determined to get as many as possible of his own people to do the same. He would let them know of the new Post, and he felt quite sure that they would visit the place out of mere curiosity at least as soon as the ice moved out of the river.

Natsatt pondered carefully what Klitonda had told him. The news was disturbing. He thought of the trading Post down the river, devoid of defence, should the Chilcats make trouble. It was his duty to return as speedily as possible, and report what he had heard. And yet he did not wish to leave the lodge. He longed to stay, to be near this beautiful maiden. He leaned comfortably back against a pile of skins, and watched her busy fingers as they ran the beads upon the slender sinew thread. The storm still roared outside, the fire crackled, and the heat made him drowsy. Yes, he must hasten away; he must not delay. But those hands fascinated him. How little they were, and yet how strong. And that thread upon which the beads were slipping brought to his mind a quaint fancy. It was his life, bare and lonely, stretching out through more than a score of years. But how changed it had become of late. What a transformation had taken place. Various colours, red and blue, green and orange, all blending so naturally. And it was she who did it. Yes, his life was like that thread, and she was working the change, transforming bareness into beauty, sweet peace and harmony for the spirit of restlessness. He wished to stay there forever, to be close to her side, to look into her eyes, and to watch those wonderful fingers. Far away now she seemed — fading from his sight — and as she moved there floated upon his ears the sound of singing, sweeter than the song of a bird, and more entrancing than any thing he had ever heard. Was it a dream?

CHAPTER V

SECRET DEPTHS

NATSATT opened his eyes and looked around the lodge. Yes, he had been asleep, and it was only a dream after all. But the singing continued. Was it the echo of that strange invisible world following him still into the world of reality? The refrain was familiar, an old tune he had heard years before. He glanced toward Owindia, and then all became clear. Her head was bent, her cheeks were flushed, and she was singing as she worked. For a time Natsatt made no movement. He was content to watch and listen. That was happiness enough.

Klitonda sat in his former position, with his knees drawn up close to his chin, gazing thoughtfully into the fire. He seemed to be paying no heed to what was taking place around him. Ere long Natsatt ran his hand beneath his own buck-skin jacket, and drew forth a small shining mouth-organ. Placing this to his lips he began to play softly the tune he had just heard. The effect was magical. Owindia started, dropped her work, and let her hands fall into her lap. Her eyes, filled with wonder, turned upon the player. The only musical instrument she knew was the doleful Indian drum. But this! Her heart beat wildly, and a new sensation thrilled her entire being. When the music ceased Natsatt smiled as he noted the expression upon the maiden's face.

"You like it?" he asked.

"Ah, ah. Wonderful! Wonderful!" she sighed. "I didn't know there was anything like it in the whole world. My mother often tried to tell me about such things, but she said I would have to hear for myself before I could really know."

"But where did you learn that song?" Natsatt questioned, speaking for the first time in English. "I didn't know you understood the white man's language."

"My mother taught it to me. She often sang it. She had such a nice voice."

"And did your mother speak English?"

"Ah, ah. There was white blood in her veins."

"And she taught you the white man's tongue?"

"Ah, ah. Even when I was a baby she would talk to me in English, but since she died I have not heard anyone speak it until you came."

"Do you know any other song?" Natsatt asked. "Did your mother teach you anything else?"

"Ah, ah. But I have forgotten most of them. There is one I remember quite well; it is so pretty."

"Will you sing it for me, please?"

Natsatt wished to hear her voice again, it was so perfectly natural. His soul had always been stirred by the sighing of the wind, the ripple of the brooks, or the spontaneous outpourings of the little feathered songsters. And now this sweet, clear voice was thrilling him in a similar manner.

> "Our Northern skies are fresh and fair,
> Our woodland trails are green;
> I love the rock-ribbed mountains hoar,
> And streams that race between.
> For there upon a happy day,
> When shadows danced and played,
> There came a lover true and bold,
> And found a dusky maid."

Placing the mouth-organ to his lips Natsatt accompanied her as she sang. Never before had the little companion of his wandering life sounded so sweet. How often had that frail instrument cheered his loneliness; what solitudes had reverberated its voice down long sombre arches; and how many trail-worn men, sitting around their camp fires at night had been stirred by thoughts of other and happier days. It had done wonderful things, that little mouth-organ, not because of any intrinsic value, but by reason of the soul which poured forth its deep longings through the simple mechanism. And Natsatt always played with much expression. But now his instrument seemed to be a living thing, and when Owindia had ceased singing the player drifted off upon various airs one after another in rapid succession. It was the one way in which he could give vent to his feelings. He could tell it exactly what was in his heart, whether of joy or sorrow.

It was all the outpouring of joy now, the ecstasy of discovery, the feeling that another life of love had blended with his.

"Do all of the white race play like that?" asked Klitonda when Natsatt had ceased. "Can all make such wonderful sounds?"

"Not all," was the reply. "But you should hear some of them. They would laugh at this," and Natsatt pointed to the mouth-organ. "There are as many kinds of things upon which they make music as there are different animals in the woods. There is one bigger than this lodge, which can growl like a bear, roar like thunder, and warble like all the birds. There is hardly any sound it cannot make."

"It must be wonderful," Klitonda sighed. "The white man can do so many things, and you have seen them all. Klota used to tell me about them, but somehow I did not believe her. I thought she must have dreamed them."

"I have not seen all the strange things myself," Natsatt responded, "but I have listened to men who have. At first I did not believe all they said, but now I know that they spoke true."

So sitting there in that quiet lodge he poured into the ears of his eager listeners some of the marvels of the strange world beyond the eastern mountains. He told them of cities, where houses stood closer together than the trees of the thickest forest; of canoes as big as hills; of railroads, horses, carriages; of other lands beyond the great water, where people were as many as the snow flakes falling outside. He told about the Queen mother, of her battle ships, her soldiers, how she ruled such a large part of the world, and no one could conquer her.

To all this Klitonda listened with marked interest. But when Natsatt spoke about the Queen's navy and army his eyes glowed with an intense light.

"And is the Queen mother stronger than the Chilcats?" he asked. "Could she conquer them?"

"Bah! The Chilcats are only rabbits to her," was the contemptuous reply.

"And will her warriors come to help the Ayana drive back the Chilcats, and keep them beyond the Coast Range?" Klitonda eagerly questioned.

Natsatt looked thoughtfully at this worried chief for a while ere replying. He knew what changes would take place in this northern region if the white men came pouring in. Did he not know something of the history of the Indians in other parts of Canada; how step by step they were being forced from their ancestral hunting grounds, to find their game slaughtered by white men, and they themselves treated as babies, cooped up on reserves or falling a prey to the deadly fire-water. Should he tell Klitonda how the Indians in Eastern Canada, and in the United States had been treated by the white men until they had risen in their fury in a vain attempt to drive the invaders back, and of the fearful horrors which followed the bloody battles which had been fought? How could he relate such things to this confiding chief? What would be the use?

"Do you wish the white men to help you against the Chilcats?" he asked.

"Ah, ah. See," and Klitonda stretched out his arm to the left as he spoke, "all this land belonged to the Ayana people. They hunted and trapped in the forest, and fished in the streams as did their fathers before them. They were strong, and their warriors feared no foe. But the Chilcats beat them in a great battle, and the hearts of the Ayana became weak. They run away; they hide in the woods, and mountains. They hear the wolves of the coast coming, and they tremble. They trade their furs and get little or nothing for them. The Chilcats steal the wives and daughters of the Ayana. They tried to steal Owindia. Klota fought them, and she died. Klitonda came suddenly from the forest. He killed one Chilcat, and the other escaped."

The chief had risen to his feet, and was standing erect as he uttered these words. The memory of that outrage was stirring his soul. His eyes glowed, and his hands were hard-clenched by his side. Natsatt had caught Klitonda's spirit. His heart beat in sympathy with the Indian's.

"And are the Chilcats such wolves?" he demanded.

"Ah, ah, much worse," the chief replied. "Wolves are sometimes satisfied, but the Chilcats never. They are always hunting Klitonda. They never stop. They would kill him, and steal Owindia. The son of the Chilcat chief wants her. She is never safe."

Natsatt's heart now beat faster than ever, and he glanced toward Owindia sitting quietly before him. She had been looking full into his face as he talked with her father. She was leaning somewhat forward, her eyes sparkling with animation, with her lips slightly parted. She had been drinking in every word that had been said about the great world of the white race. Her eyes dropped as they encountered those of the young man, and a flush mantled her cheeks. Into Natsatt's heart shot a sudden feeling of dread. He understood why the son of the Chilcat chief should seek to obtain this maiden. Such beauty of features, and perfection of form would be fatal gifts even in the world of civilisation. But here in the wilderness where might was right, how hardly could she escape. The thought of her danger grew stronger upon him. But what could he do to save her? He must make an effort at any rate. He must not lose her now. And yet his own position was as precarious as hers. If the Chilcats were as ferocious as Klitonda had described they would not long endure the presence of the white traders in the country. Even now, no doubt, they knew about the Post, and were planning for its speedy destruction. It would therefore be necessary for him to leave Owindia, hurry down the river, and warn his companions of the danger to which they were exposed.

But how could he go away from this maiden, who all unconsciously was exerting such a strong influence upon his restless spirit? So impetuous was his nature that he did not stop to consider what Owindia's feelings might be toward him. He thought merely of his own happiness and what it meant to be near her, and to look upon her face. In her presence there was fulness of life, such as he had never known before. And to think that she was in danger from the Chilcats! A flood of anger suddenly rushed upon him. Why did the Ayana allow such tyrants to oppress them? They were strong enough to hurl back the invaders, and why did they not do it?

"Have the Ayana no hearts?" he asked, turning toward Klitonda. "Can nothing be done to arouse them to fight the Chilcats, and to drive them back?"

"Nothing," was the sad reply. "Klitonda has gone from camp to camp, and has said much. The Ayana talk, but do nothing."

"Are they all weak-hearted?" Natsatt demanded. "Are there none who will stand by their chief?"

"There are some who are not cowards, but they are only a few. They would follow Klitonda to the death if he called them."

Thus Natsatt learned that little help could be expected from the Ayana Indians. The white traders had come into the country, and were they to be driven back, probably killed, when spring came? No, such a thing must not happen. As soon as the storm abated he would hurry back to the Post. It would be necessary for him to leave Owindia for a while. To remain would be worse than useless.

And thus throughout the short winter day the three sat quietly in the lodge and talked of many things. The conversation was mostly between Klitonda and Natsatt, but occasionally Owindia spoke, and her words were always like the sweetest of music to the ardent young lover.

CHAPTER VI

REJECTED

THE next morning the sky was clear, the tempest having beaten out its fury during the night. It had been the heaviest storm of the season, and in fact for several years. The snow was piled high around the lodge, and it was with difficulty that Klitonda forced his way through the yielding mass to gain the outer world. It was necessary for him to hasten forth as the last stick had been thrown upon the fire, and he must seek for more dry fuel amidst the forest. Not a breath of wind stirred the trees. They stood shrouded and heavily laden with their white burden. Not a sound broke the intense silence, and no track of man, beast or bird marred the snow.

Within the lodge stood Natsatt and Owindia. The former was girt for a long journey, and a pair of snow-shoes, borrowed from Klitonda, leaned against the wall. He was holding Owindia's hands in his, and his eyes were looking lovingly into her blushing downcast face. There was not the slightest doubt as to the attitude of the two. A love deep and tender burned within their hearts. They had waited years for such a meeting. Natsatt had wandered far and wide, but not until he had reached this spot in the forest did he find the one to whom his heart responded.

"And you will come back — some day?" Owindia was asking. "You will not forget?"

"Forget? How can I ever forget?" was the passionate reply. "And you will be waiting for me, will you not, little one? You will be glad to see me?"

"Ah, ah. The days will be like years while you are away. But sometimes I fear you might never return. Since you came life has been so different. There is much to live for now. And yet —"

Here she hesitated, and paused.

"What is it?" questioned Natsatt.

"I have been wondering how you, a white man, can love Owindia. There must be so many maidens of your own race beyond the mountains of the rising sun. I know so little, while they must be so wise and beautiful."

"Oh, that's what's troubling you," Natsatt laughed, pressing her hands more firmly in his. "But I am as much an Indian, nay more so, than you are. I speak several Indian languages better than the English; I was born in the wilderness, and have spent most of my life there. And I am going to tell you something now which may astonish you. My father was a white man, but my mother was an Indian woman. So you see I am what is called a 'half-breed.'"

Owindia started at these words, and looked keenly into Natsatt's eyes to make sure that he was speaking the truth.

"But you seem like a white man," she replied. "Maybe you are laughing at Owindia in your heart."

"No, no, I am not," protested the young man. "What I tell you is true. People at times will not believe me because I look so much like a full-blooded white man. But surely you will believe me. Why should I lie to you?"

"I know now you tell me true when you look at me that way," and Owindia glanced shyly at him as she spoke. "My heart is, oh, so happy. It sings all the time."

In response to this Natsatt stooped, and imprinted a fervent kiss upon her lips. It was the first time that she had known a lover's kiss, and it thrilled her whole being. Owindia did nothing by halves. She was a creature of the wild. Her likes and dislikes were strong. When her heart was stirred it was intense, overwhelming. Lifting her long slender arms she twined them suddenly around Natsatt's neck, and laid her cheek against his. Never had she known such real happiness, not even in the days when her mother had enfolded her in her loving embrace.

And thus all through that day she lived in a world of dreams. Her mind was ever with Natsatt, and she pictured him speeding over the snow on his way down to the trading Post.

Her father did not notice her far away look, nor her abstracted manner, for he himself was lost in a world of deep thought. He sat hour after hour before the fire with his knees close up to his chin, staring straight before him. He only bestirred himself to replenish the fire or to eat his frugal meal which Owindia prepared. He sat in this position until midnight. Then he rolled himself up in his blanket and slept till morning. When he awoke his every movement spoke of definite action. Owindia was surprised to see him set to work to take down the numerous pelts from the walls and arrange them in two piles. Sometimes he would stand for a while as if debating with himself into which pile he would put certain valuable furs. When at last all the skins had been taken down he tied the two bundles together with stout moose-hide thongs.

Owindia asked no questions. She understood her father's peculiar moods and knew when to be silent. He would tell her his plans at the proper time, she felt sure.

Putting on his snow-shoes, and swinging the larger bundle upon his shoulder, Klitonda left the lodge and strode rapidly across the open until he came to a place where three trees stood quite close together. Up among the branches was his caché, where he kept his supply of moose meat safe from prowling dogs and wolves. Tying a long moose-hide cord to the bundle, and taking the other end in his hand he climbed one of the trees to the scaffold of poles above. Then drawing up the heavy bundle he placed it in the centre of the cache, and with a grunt of satisfaction returned by the way he had come. Once back in the lodge his tongue became unloosened.

"Little one," he began, "my heart is much stirred by what the stranger told us. The white men have come, and have built the trading Post. They will help us to drive back the Chilcats. As I sat by the fire last night I saw a strange sight. Klota, your mother, seemed to be standing by my side, and she was pointing toward the mountains of the rising sun. And as I looked I saw the passes filled with people of the white race coming toward me. I am sure now that they are on their way into this country, and will help us."

"Perhaps you were dreaming, father," Owindia replied.

"No, no, it was no dream. I was awake, and know it was real. So, little one, we must hurry away from here, and bear the great news to our people. They will not refuse to rouse to action when I tell them about the white men, and what they will do for us. I shall take these furs as gifts to the scattered bands. You must come with me. We shall hasten away at once, for there is no time to lose."

Owindia knew how useless it would be to argue with her father when once his mind was settled upon some definite line of action. With a sigh she gathered up her few belongings, tied them in a small bundle, and took down her light snow-shoes from two pegs driven into the wall. She did not cherish the idea of leaving the snug cabin for the long marches over the dreary wastes of a snow-shrouded land. She wished to remain where she was, for the hope was strong within her heart that Natsatt would shortly return, and what would he think when he found the place deserted? She kept these thoughts to herself, however, and obediently followed her father out of the cabin, with her small pack suspended over her shoulders.

Once outside the lodge Klitonda paused and stood for a few moments lost in thought. Then lifting up his face, he uttered words such as Owindia had never heard him speak before.

"Great Spirit," he began, "and Klota's Great Father, listen to Klitonda. Give the Ayana people hearts of fire, and strength of grizzlies of the mountains, that they may rise and drive back the Chilcats. Send the white people into this land like the wild geese when the ice leaves the rivers, and the snow disappears, that they may help us."

He ceased, and stood for a few moments looking straight before him. Then without another word he strode forward into the sombre forest, with Owindia following silently after.

For days they threaded their way over the great silent land. Spectres they seemed gliding through forests, climbing steep hills, winding along sloping mountain sides, and dotting here and there large inland lakes. Occasionally they stayed their steps where a few lone hunters and trappers had their camp. At each place

Klitonda would spend the whole night talking to the eager few gathered about the camp fire. Formerly one topic, and only one, was the theme of vital importance, and that was the hated Chilcats. Now the interest was greatly intensified by the story of the advent of the white men. Deeply interested in his subject, and a natural orator of much repute among the tribes of the North, Klitonda as a rule succeeded in imparting to his hearers some of his own enthusiasm. But, alas, after he left, the fire generally burned low, and sometimes went out altogether. In the presence of their chief the Ayana people could be stirred for a time, but the fear of the Chilcats was too strong for the impression to last.

Klitonda's stay at such places was always short. Miles beyond he knew there was a large band of Indians, and thither he and Owindia turned their faces. It was a cold late afternoon as weary with their long march, they reached the encampment, and here that night Klitonda related again the marvellous tale he had come so far to tell. For this moment he had been longing since the day he had started forth from his lonely lodge in the wilderness. Surely now these hunters would respond as they listened to the story of the white man, the opportunity for better trade, and the assistance they would receive in driving back the Chilcats. But as he talked his keen eyes noted the apathy upon the faces of those before him. He even detected signs of hostility, which was different from anything he had ever experienced in their midst. They had always treated him with marked respect even though they did not carry out his wishes. When at length he ceased the usual exclamations of assent were wanting. A deep silence prevailed, which to Klitonda was most ominous. He could not understand the meaning of such action. When, however, old Nagu, the crafty medicine man, rose slowly to his feet, light dawned upon the chief's mind. In this man he saw his bitter opponent, his violent enemy. He recalled the day, over a year ago, when he had mortally offended this wily impostor. He had refused to pay the customary tribute, or "medicine," of valuable furs and skins to this man. He had told him that his incantations were all a farce, and that he himself was a useless humbug. For years Klitonda had despised the vain pretensions of this creature. He had kept his thoughts to himself, however, and had paid the required tribute, until that day, when roused by the insolence of the man, he had expressed his feelings in no moderate terms. Klitonda had yet to learn that the way of the reformer is hard, and that people held in thrall by the ingrained superstition of ages, are not easily taught to open their eyes to the bright light of a new and an ampler day. Such a task at any time is difficult, but it is increased tenfold when the acknowledged leaders, whether they be prophets, priests or medicine men are themselves debased, and are seeking for material gain and personal influence.

And such was Nagu. Those who honoured him, he favoured; but woe betide the man or woman daring enough to offer any opposition. So standing there in the midst of his people, he hurled his pent-up anger at Klitonda. Subtly concealing his own personal injury he upbraided the chief as the cause of all their present trouble. He had been stirring up strife, had killed the Chilcat brave, and thus brought upon the Ayana people the extra vengeance of the coast tribe. And what were they now to do? The Chilcats were coming in full force, and if Klitonda were not delivered up terrible would be the consequences.

During his harangue the medicine man had worked himself up to the highest pitch of fury. He foamed, raved, and gesticulated like a madman, while all the time his eyes glared upon Klitonda with the most intense hatred.

During this attack the chief stood like a statue, with Owindia crouching near at his feet. The latter was terrified by the scene before her. But not a movement of her father's face betrayed the state of his feelings. It was only when the medicine man had ceased and the murmurs of approval had subsided, that he took a step forward, and looked around upon the assembled natives. A sadness, mingled with pity might have been detected in his eyes as he stood there. Then he lifted his right arm and pointed to the medicine man.

"Will the Ayana people listen to such words as that creature has just uttered?" he asked. "They know it is not Klitonda who is to blame for all their trouble; it is their own cowardly hearts. Where is the spirit of our ancestors? Where is the power of our once famous Ayana tribe? There was a time when the call to battle was like the sweetest of music to our people. They gloried in war. Klitonda would rouse the Ayana to action. But they would rather be slaves. They wish to crawl like dogs at the feet of the Chilcat wolves. Klitonda is your chief. He has never failed his people yet. He stands here to-night; his daughter is there," and he partly turned as he spoke and pointed to the pathetic figure of Owindia crouching upon the snow. "Take your chief; take his daughter, and give them to the Chilcats that you may be safe. Then go and tell your little ones, and when they are grown let them tell their children that you were afraid to fight; that your hearts were like water, and your arms like straw, and you gave up your chief and his daughter to those wolves of the coast. How will it sound? You hunters and trappers, answer me that. Klitonda is willing to give himself, nay to die for his people. Here he stands, come and take him."

He paused, and waited for some one to advance. But none moved. What hunter would dare to lay hands upon that chief, of whose courage and prowess they were well aware? They did not even look upon his face, but sat or stood with downcast averted eyes. Their chief's words had cut deep, for they knew that they were true. Only the medicine man glared like a wild beast, but to him Klitonda gave no heed.

The latter waited to see what the people would do. But finding that they remained silent and inactive, he turned to Owindia and took her by the hand.

"Come, little one," he said. "Let us get back to the wilderness. Our people do not want us."

Not a word was uttered, and not a hand was raised as father and daughter left the camp, and turned their faces toward the black, silent forest. The chief had come to his own, to help, to uplift them; but his own received him not. They preferred the flesh pots of serfdom to the freedom of a larger and a fuller life.

Klitonda was accustomed to discouragements. He could meet death without a tremor. When face to face with avowed enemies his heart thrilled with the joy of conflict. But when it came to downright opposition and repulsion by his own people it was different. Next to Owindia they were nearest his heart in affection. For them he had toiled and suffered, and for them he was willing to die. Their pitiable downtrodden condition moved him deeply. Though he had often lashed the men with stinging words in the hope of stirring the spirit of manhood within them, there was really no anger in his heart. He had looked upon their strong, lithe forms; he had studied them at their games, in which they rivalled with one another in feats of endurance. Oh, if he could only utilise such strength in a more worthy cause, how much might be accomplished. He had watched the bright-eyed comely maidens, and a sadness always filled his heart, for he knew that the more beautiful they were the sooner would they be likely to fall captives to the wily Chilcats. Even the little babes in their moose-skin bags touched him. What trials and sorrows they had ahead of them — the same life of serfdom as their parents. For the cowardice of their forefathers the little ones must tread the cruel trail of affliction.

So on this night of the rejection as he and Owindia pushed speedily on their way, there was no feeling of bitterness within his heart except for the medicine man. He knew that that wretched creature had much to do with his present failure. He himself was free from his dominating power. But not so the rest of the tribe.

Owindia uttered not a word as she followed her father through the shadowy forest. She was tired not only in body but also in mind. The trying ordeal through which they had just passed had almost overcome her. She knew that now they were exposed to two dangers, one from the Chilcats; the other, from their own people. Surely no outcasts were ever placed in a more lamentable position than were these two waifs of the night.

No word of complaint, no outcry at the injustice done to him, broke from Klitonda's lips. He was not like the cur, which rushes away at a kick it has received. He was rather like some lordly monarch of the forest, which deeply wounded seeks some quiet spot to be alone in its great agony. No sleep came to his eyes that night. Amid a friendly thicket of fir trees he made their camp, and while Owindia slept, he either sat before the fire, or paced restlessly up and down among the trees. He was most alert, and at every sound he listened intently, partly expecting an attack from his own people. That they were contemplating handing him and Owindia over to the Chilcats he had not the slightest doubt. When he was present with them he knew they had not the courage to seize him. But under cover of night they might make the attack, expecting to find him asleep.

All the next day they continued on their journey, back to the lodge in the wilderness. Owindia was well accustomed to the trail, and did not find it difficult to keep up with her father. Although grieving over what had recently taken place, a sweet peace dwelt in her heart. Natsatt was constantly in her mind, and the thought of him cheered her through the long hours of the day, and she fell asleep at night thinking of her lover. Could Natsatt have seen the graceful swing of her lithe form, and beheld the rich colour of perfect health mantling cheeks and brow, he would have been more enamoured than ever. Owindia confided none of her happy thoughts to her father. He was too much engrossed with his own cares at present. She was content to keep them hidden away within her own breast, like dew-kissed flowers nestling in some secret dell.

The second night Klitonda was too weary to keep watch. He felt safer now, and believed that they would not be followed so far into the forest. He remained for a while, however, after Owindia had fallen asleep, watching the dying embers. Then he rolled himself up in his warm wolf-skin blanket, and was soon in slumber deep.

CHAPTER VII

TOKENS

SILENCE prevailed for a few minutes in the Indian encampment after Klitonda and Owindia had left. All sat or stood with bent heads, each waiting for some one else to speak first. Nagu alone cast his eyes furtively around. He was pleased at the defeat of the chief, but somewhat disturbed by the stillness which reigned. He partly divined the cause, and believed that the Indians were ashamed of their own cowardice, and the way they had treated Klitonda. He knew how his own influence even now hung in the balance, and it needed only a few to make a decided stand, and all would join them.

And while this unnatural quietness brooded over the place a score of hunters glided into their midst. Their arrival at this moment was most opportune. The tension was relieved, and all began to talk at once. The subject was Klitonda, and the message he had delivered. Nothing was said about the medicine man or the part that he had played in defeating the object of their chief's visit. But the returned hunters at length learned the whole story when Nagu had betaken himself to his own lodge. They were a score of strapping braves, and had travelled far that day. But all sense of weariness disappeared as they drew aside and earnestly consulted with one another. Out in the wild during the long nights around their camp fires they had discussed many things concerning their own land, and the dominant sway of the Chilcats. For their chief they had the most profound respect. They believed that with a band of men to support him the invaders could be driven back. This idea had been gripping them hard for some time, and had drawn them together more than formerly. Kindred spirits they were who had now emerged from the forest at this critical moment.

The medicine man was not satisfied with their presence. He watched them from his lodge, and endeavoured to hear what they were saying, but all in vain, for the young men spoke low, and kept their counsel to themselves. Had Nagu drawn near just then it would not have been well with him, for these braves were in no mood for interference from this creature whom they were beginning to despise.

Next morning, bright and early, they glided away from camp, and followed the tracks made by Klitonda and his daughter in the pure white snow. Their eyes were keenly alert, and they moved forward with scarcely a sound. They were evidently watching for something besides the chief and Owindia. It was almost dark, when, about to emerge from the forest to cross a small lake, they paused abruptly, and crouched back among the trees. Out in the open their eyes had caught sight of a lone lank timber wolf. He had stopped and was sniffing the tracks he had found upon the snow. Presently he lifted his head and threw his nose into the air. The hated man smell had drifted to his sensitive nostrils, and that spelled danger. But ere he had time to beat a retreat a half dozen bow strings twanged among the trees, and as many pointed arrows hurtled through the air, and sank deep into the brute's lean side. With a wild yell of agony the wolf gave a tremendous bound into the air and then rolled over in the snow, its body quivering in the throes of death.

It did not take the hunters long to rush from the forest, and examine their victim. Soon a sharp knife was produced, and with much deftness the heart was removed from the animal's body. It was apparent that the wolf was needed neither for its skin, nor for food. There was another motive for its death. With the heart warm and bleeding thus procured, the braves formed themselves in a circle about the grewsome object. Then each hunter drew forth an arrow, and inserted its point deep into the soft flesh. No word was spoken during this performance, which had the appearance of a religious ceremony, bloody though it was. Then facing the forest to their left they held aloft their dripping arrows, and as one their voices rang out:

" As the heart blood of this wolf dyes the points of these arrows, so twenty Ayana hunters will never cease until these same points are stained with the heart blood of their enemies. Let these blood-marked arrows be tokens of their resolve, and let the Great Spirit bear witness."

This done they sped on their way, leaving behind them the body of the wolf, its blood flowing forth, and turning the white snow to a crimson hue. By this time darkness had settled over the land, but the hunters heeded it not. With never a single hesitation they followed the tracks which stretched out far ahead. Ere long the moon rose full and bright above the tops of the pointed trees. It rode high in the heavens, and dimly illuminated the long cathedral-like aisles of the silent forest. The trees threw out straight trailing shadows like sharp pointed lances. It was a scene of surpassing beauty; light and shade, peace and grandeur; the full triumphant moon above, the gem-besprinkled carpet of snow below. And through this magic palace sped the feet of the Ayana braves. Their hearts were not stirred by the splendour which surrounded them. To them this fairy world held no fascination. Their hearts were not enthralled by Nature's alluring witchery.

It was midnight when at length their steps grew slower, and they moved more cautiously. Through the keen night air drifted the scent of smouldering wood. Presently a rough "lean-to" was faintly discerned several rods ahead. They peered keenly forward, but no one was visible, and not a sound disturbed the intense silence. The hunters did not approach any nearer now, but remained crouched upon the snow in a watchful attitude. It was a keen night, but the young men did not seem to mind it.

For about two hours they kept watch over the little camp. Then they noticed Klitonda rise to his feet and rekindle the fire from a few hot coals. At once the young men stepped quickly forward and stood before the chief. Turning, the latter saw them, and leaped for his bow and arrows. Then standing defiantly before the place where Owindia was lying, he faced the young men. He believed that they had come to attack him and to take him back as captive. He was, therefore, much surprised when one of the braves advanced and lifted his hand as a sign of peace. Still Klitonda was not satisfied, and remained ready for any emergency. Perhaps this was only a ruse on the part of these braves. Why had they followed him so far into the forest unless they had some sinister motive in view? And thus standing there in the light of the moon he appeared a most formidable antagonist. A man of powerful build, and of great stature, he seemed now a veritable giant. His aspect at this moment was enough to cause even the stoutest heart to shrink. The advancing brave hesitated, and then spoke.

" Great Chief," he began, " the Ayana braves are no enemies to Klitonda. They bring peace. They come to serve their chief, not to harm him. They followed hard upon his tracks until they found him. They bring tokens of their allegiance. Will the Great Chief receive them?"

He paused, and Klitonda lowered his bow.

"Why do the Ayana braves come here?" he replied. "Do they wish to mock their chief? But, stay, Klitonda is their chief no longer; they have rejected him. He is an outcast. His own people would give him over to the Chilcats. His plans have failed, they are like this," and Klitonda seized a handful of snow, and let it fall slowly downward.

"The Great Chief's words are only partly true," the young brave quietly returned. "There are twenty braves standing here, whose hearts are true to their chief. They would follow him to death on behalf of their country. They bring these tokens of their faith — tokens stained with blood. As they are red from a wolf's bleeding heart, so may they be more deeply stained by the heart blood of the Chilcat wolves."

Saying which the brave stepped forward, and handed Klitonda the blood-marked arrow. One by one his companions did the same. Not a word was spoken during this performance. Klitonda received them all, and held the arrows in his right hand. He looked at the tokens, and then at the young men standing before him.

"What will Klitonda do with these?" he asked, holding forth the score of arrows.

"Keep them," was the reply, "and when the Great

Chief wants the twenty Ayana braves, let him send the tokens, and they will come swift as the wind."

To these words Klitonda said nothing. He stood looking beyond the braves far off into the forest. The unexpected appearance of these young men was affecting him deeply. The great weight which had been pressing upon his heart was somewhat removed. All of his own people had not rejected him. There were twenty braves who were ready to stand by his side. There was comfort in the thought. He wished to speak, to tell all that was in his heart. But words refused to come. He was like a dumb man. The braves saw the struggle which was taking place in their chief's mind, and his silence impressed them more than a long oration.

Presently Klitonda turned as if to place several sticks upon the fire. As he did so he saw Owindia standing quietly near. Upon her face was an expression of joy. She had been a silent witness of all that had taken place. The braves had seen her when first she appeared, but they gave no sign that they were aware of her presence. But twenty hearts thrilled as they saw her standing near her father. Klitonda held out the arrows to Owindia.

"Take them, little one," he said. "They will be safe in your keeping. Is it the will of the Ayana braves," he continued, turning to the young man, "that their chief's daughter should guard these tokens which they have brought?"

"Ah, ah," burst at once from a score of lips. "Let the chief's daughter keep the blood-marked tokens."

Thus in the depth of that great forest twenty resolute braves gave their allegiance to Klitonda their chief. Indians they were, in the rough, untouched by any of the refining influences of civilisation. And yet they were real sons of Mother Nature. Their word was their bond, and having once made their vow of allegiance nothing could induce them to break it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE VANGUARD

TO enter a region never before trodden by white men, and to erect a fur trading Post where the sole inhabitants are uncouth Indians, means courage of no ordinary degree. And, yet, when "Ranger" Dan forced his way beyond the Rocky Mountains, with his ten companions, and built the trading Post Fort-O-Venture at the confluence of the Yukon and the Segas Rivers, the thought that he had done anything out of the ordinary never entered his mind. So accustomed had he been for long years to the perils of the wilderness that the dangers he and his men encountered in their hazardous journey were of but passing notice.

His companions did not fully understand their leader. Months before when Ranger Dan had searched long and diligently for a number of determined men to accompany him to the great river west of the Rockies, many people believed that he was taking leave of his senses. "Why," they asked one another, "should a man at his advanced age wish to undertake such a journey? Surely it was not for gain, as Dan had acquired more than ordinary of this world's goods in his years of trading with the Indians. What, then, was the object of the expedition?"

Often the traders east of the mountains had turned their eyes wistfully westward, and longed to know what lay beyond those towering snow-capped peaks. Stray rumours at times had drifted to their ears of the extent of that unknown region, with its abundance of fur-bearing animals. But hitherto no one had dared to cross those northern ranges and solve the mystery. Indians told weird tales of the wildness of the land, of treacherous rivers, foaming rapids, and natives, numerous and bloodthirsty. Little wonder, then, that Ranger Dan found it difficult to obtain enough men to accompany him on his apparently mad venture. When asked as to the purpose of the undertaking he would always give a quiet smile, and stroke his long beard before replying.

"I've something lost beyond those mountains," he would say. "It's been lost for years, and I must try to find it. I've a treasure over yon, and doesn't the Great Book say that 'where your treasure is there will your heart be also'? I guess those words apply to this world as well as to the next."

And so Dan's "treasure" story passed from mouth to mouth. "He's after furs," said some. "No, it's gold the fool's seeking," replied others. "That's the treasure he thinks he'll get over yon."

After much difficulty Dan was able to find ten men who were willing to undertake the journey. Liberal pay induced several to join the expedition; while others were lured by the spirit of adventure. All had led a roving life for years, and here was an opportunity for new and further excitement.

As the days passed Ranger Dan was enabled to learn much about his companions. Amid the dangers of the way, the hard tracking, and packing over the long portages their real natures stood out clearly defined. They were men unaccustomed to discipline, of unbridled passion, and ready to desert their leader at any critical moment. Only upon Natsatt, the reserved young half-breed, did he feel that he could fully depend.

Ranger Dan was a stern man, and during his long experience in the wilderness had ruled with a firm hand. When in charge his word was law, and he would brook no opposition. Of large build and great stature he was a man to command immediate respect. Many an offender had reason to remember the flashing gleam of his wrathful eyes, and the sledge-hammer blows of his tense knuckles. "When I'm in command," he had often said, "I'm going to be obeyed, else what's the use of having a leader." He talked but little, and at times he would stand facing the west, with a far away look in his faded grey eyes.

Each night around the camp fire Natsatt would bring forth his little mouth-organ, and play several simple tunes. Then all talking would cease and the men would lie back and listen to the familiar strains they had heard years before. Ranger Dan always enjoyed such moments, and his face would brighten as he listened, although occasionally a half-suppressed sigh would escape his lips. Natsatt often watched his leader, and felt that there was something troubling his mind of which he and his companions were not aware. He longed to know of what he was thinking as he stood gazing far off into space.

As the days passed his respect for Ranger Dan increased. He seemed to be tireless, and his knowledge of woodcraft was wonderful. But it was when they settled down to the steady work of building the Post at the mouth of the river that his respect developed into admiration.

Dan at once set the men to work preparing timber for the building. There was little time to lose, for the season was advancing, and soon cold weather would be upon them. Never once did he hesitate as to the position or size of the house. The most suitable site was chosen close to the river, and here the Post was erected, with store attached. In a few weeks the work was well under way. Built entirely of hewn logs, chinked with moss, and this covered with soft clay found along the bank of the river, it was a structure capable of withstanding the most severe weather. It seemed almost like a fort so large were the logs which had been rolled into place, and securely fastened upon one another. Glass for the small windows there was none. Caribou skins, devoid of hair, and scraped thin, were stretched across the openings, and these let in some light when the door was shut. Two large stone fire-places were erected, at which their cooking was done. These would serve to give light as well as heat, for it would be necessary to reserve their small supply of candles they had brought with them.

The building was completed none too soon, for winter swept down upon them much sooner than they had expected. The river became solid from bank to bank, snow covered the land, and the frost became stinging in its intensity. The days were short, and the nights long. It was necessary for the best hunters to scour the surrounding hills and forest for moose and mountain sheep. Natsatt had the best luck of all, and by means of his excellent marksmanship he was able to add much to their larder.

The first two months of severe weather passed away most pleasantly. There was very little for the men to do, and they enjoyed the long rest after their hard labours since leaving the eastern side of the mountains. The cheerful fires made the large room almost as light as day. Dry, soft wood was plentiful, and they burned it without stint. Cards formed the chief amusement, interspersed with singing of songs, and story telling. It was a time of general good fellowship. They were a little company alone in the vast wilderness. "What more could men desire?" they asked one another, "than a life such as this? Abundance of game, long hours of sleep, work of the lightest, and no cares to distract the mind."

During the whole of this time no Indian had visited the Post by day. Canoes had passed up and down the river during the fall, but the occupants had not disembarked to examine the new building upon the bank. If the natives came at all it must have been in the night, departing without leaving the slightest sign of their presence. Often the men discussed the matter before the open fire. There was a general impression that they were being watched; that Indians were prowling around, though keeping warily out of sight.

"It isn't natural," commented Larry Dasan, a big burly Canadian. "I've helped build a dozen trading Posts in my time, an' before we had the first logs laid the Siwashes were always around us like flies — men, women, papooses, and lean dogs galore. They were coming and going all the time. But here," and he threw out his right hand in disgust, "not a d—— redskin has set foot on the premises by day, an' it's been four months since we arrived."

"Me no savvey wat it all mean," replied Pierre Goutre, a small Frenchman. "Bad beezness dis. No Injun, no fur, no monee, hey? Ol' man heem mak' beeg meestake, me tink. Heem send Natsatt an' Tony to round up Injun. Mebbe dey'll ketch 'em."

The men generally indulged in such free conversation when Ranger Dan was not present. At times the latter would take his snow-shoes, and tramp the woods for hours. He wished to be alone — to think. To him the games and idle chat of his men were of no interest. He was playing another game in which the heart alone was concerned, and he had staked much upon the throw. He needed the trade of the Indians of this land, as the furs would reimburse him for the heavy expenditure he had made. But he could do without their trade if only they would come to the Post. If from far and near, from forest depths, mountain lakes, and turbid rivers, they would gather to look upon the white men, and the building they had erected. If once he could see them, then they might go their way without making the smallest purchase from the store. If only he could behold their dusky faces even for a few moments, he would be somewhat satisfied. He believed that somewhere in this region would come the one for whom his heart had so long been yearning. And even though she did not appear surely among all the bands of the North he would hear some word of her, whether she were dead or alive. Men had called him a fool. But what did he care? How could they understand the deep passionate longings of an old man's lonely heart?

He missed Natsatt from the Post, and anxiously awaited his return. That he and Tony would bring some word of the Indians he had no doubt. But when the storm burst over the land his anxiety developed into fear for the absent ones. When at length Tony staggered in almost exhausted from his hard battle with the raging of the elements, Ranger Dan felt sure that Natsatt had been lost, unless perchance he had found refuge in some Indian camp. This latter gave him but little comfort, for Tony had not met a single native, neither had he seen any signs of recent camp fires.

Natsatt had become very dear to the old Ranger's heart. He had conversed with him more than with the others, and they had numerous things in common. Every night Dan would lie in the bunk and listen to Natsatt playing old familiar airs. But with the young man away the days and nights seemed uncommonly long and dreary.

It was the second evening after the storm that they were all gathered about one of the fire-places. They were discussing again for the hundredth time Natsatt's probable fate. To go in search of him they knew would be useless. His tracks had long since been obliterated, and the snow was too deep to find his body should he have perished in the wilderness. Ranger Dan was about to turn into his bunk, when the door suddenly opened, and Natsatt entered. Had his ghost appeared out of the night his companions could not have been more astonished. They greeted him as one from the dead, and plied him with all sorts of questions as to his experience in the storm.

The news of vital importance Natsatt reserved for Ranger Dan alone. He waited until the others had gone to bed. Then drawing his leader aside, in a low voice he told him all he had learned about the fierce Chilcats, and what a menace they might prove to the trading Post. Dan became deeply interested in the story, and asked the young man many questions concerning the Coast tribe, and their domineering sway over the Ayana Indians.

"This is all new to me," he at length remarked. "I must have time to think it over, and decide what is the best to do. If what you have just told me is true it may help to explain something which has been puzzling me for years. You had better rest now, for you must be greatly wearied after your long trip. I am very grateful to the chief Klitonda for saving your life. He must be a remarkable man, and a very exceptional Indian."

Natsatt said nothing about the chief's daughter, Owindia. He did not wish his companions to know of the prize he had found in the wilderness. His love was too sacred a thing to be bandied about on the lips of coarse minded men. He had heard much of their conversation in the past, and knew what to expect if he divulged his great heart's secret. He had thorough knowledge of the lives of some of these men. Little respect had they for native women, considering them merely as their lawful prey. He trembled, therefore, with apprehension as he thought of Owindia. Such beauty and charm of face and form could hardly escape their hawk-like, greedy eyes. He himself had often laughed at a number of their base jokes. But now his heart grew hot within him. How could he endure such remarks about Owindia? No, they would not be repeated in his presence, he was determined about that.

He would guard her to the last. Absence of several days had increased his love for the chief's daughter. The Post seemed unusually lonely and uninteresting since his return. He longed to be back again to the little cabin in the forest. He did not even mention his secret to Dan. He knew he could trust the old Ranger, but he hesitated about mentioning it now when his leader's mind was worried over the Chilcats. No, he would say nothing at present, but wait for a more favourable opportunity.

It did not take Ranger Dan long to make up his mind concerning what Natsatt had told him about the Coast tribe. One night was sufficient for him in which to decide, and the next morning he explained his position to his men. He told them how essential it would be to fortify the Post lest the Chilcats should come, and find them unprepared. He accordingly ordered the men into the forest to cut suitable trees for the barricade he intended to erect.

Thus the days of repose were at an end. Some of the men murmured at the task which confronted them. But Dan was obdurate, and commanded them to obey or to leave the Post. There was, therefore, nothing for the objectors to do but to fall in line and work, for to leave at such a season of the year would mean almost certain death.

Trees of a suitable size were felled, and drawn to the Post on a rough sled made for the purpose. They were all carefully trimmed, and their tops hewn to sharp points. As it was impossible to dig trenches in which to place the trees it was necessary to build a heavy frame work for their support. Thus day by day the work steadily advanced, and ere long one side of the Post was protected by a most formidable barricade, which was almost insurmountable for the most agile warrior.

Only for a few hours each day could the men remain at their work. At times it was bitterly cold, which often severely tested their patience. Dan worked with his men, at the same time supervising everything. As the days began to lengthen the weather grew warmer, and the work advanced more rapidly. The Post stood but several rods from the river. To the latter Dan ran two rows of trees, thus forming a narrow passage through which water could be carried in case of an attack, and also to form a means of retreat to their canoe if necessary.

Spring was upon them by the time the work was completed, and the men were thus enabled to rest awhile from their labours. As soon as the ice left the river Dan expected the Indians to arrive, if they were to come at all. It was the time after their long months of hunting when they would wish to dispose of their furs. So far no further word had been heard of the Chilcats. Dan was not surprised, for he knew that they had a long distance to travel, and the river was the only feasible route when the snow had left the ground. Every morning when he arose he partly expected to see some of the Ayana Indians before night. As the days passed, and none appeared, an anxious expression was seen upon his face. Natsatt noticed it, and sympathised with his leader. He, too, was longing for the appearance of the natives. Surely Klitonda and his daughter would be among the first to arrive. How he yearned to see Owindia. Her image had been constantly in his mind since he had left her in the little lodge long weeks before. Had she, too, been longing for him? he wondered. He found it hard to dissemble his feelings so as not to arouse the suspicion of his companions. But at times they did chaff him about his absent-mindedness, and the far-away look in his eyes. If only he could confide his secret to some one he knew it would be a great relief. Often he was on the point of telling everything to Dan. But each time an indefinable barrier seemed to rise between them, so the pent-up words which were ready to pour from his yearning heart never passed his lips.

CHAPTER IX

CHIVALRY

IT was a day long to be remembered when the ice ran out of the Segas River. The weather had been mild for some time, and slowly the solid icy giant weakened, loosened its grip upon the banks, and began to break up into thousands of fragments. The current was swift, and steadily the water rose. At last an ominous grinding sound was heard as the great heaving mass started for the Yukon. It surged along the shores, and threatened to tear away the building which had been erected. Several large cakes of ice were hurled against the barricade, and remained stranded, while their companions passed on without doing any damage.

Ranger Dan breathed a sigh of relief when he saw the river clear. He could look forward now to the coming of the Indians. Surely they would arrive soon. But Dan's anxiety was as nothing compared to Natsatt's. The latter was impatient for the time when Klitonda and Owindia would appear. The days seemed unusually long. His eyes would often search the river for the expected canoe which would bring his loved one to him.

A week had passed since the ice ran out, and no Indians had arrived. Then, late one evening, just as the sun was preparing to dip below the horizon, Natsatt saw a small canoe shoot swiftly around a bend in the river, and approach the Post. His heart beat fast as he beheld Owindia in the centre of the craft deftly handling her slim paddle. Hurrying forward he reached the river just as the canoe ran into the shore. A radiant smile overspread Owindia's face as she saw her lover waiting to receive her. To Natsatt she seemed more beautiful than ever. Her cheeks were flushed by the healthy exercise, and her eyes were sparkling with joy and love. But as she stepped ashore a natural shyness possessed her, which caused her to shrink back a little. Natsatt, too, hesitated, for standing by his side were a number of men from the Post.

In his first delight at seeing Owindia he had forgotten his companions. How he longed to seize the maiden in his arms and greet her with a true lover's kiss. But in the presence of these men he realised that it would not be wise. They knew nothing of the fire burning within his heart, and would misinterpret the act.

Owindia stood abashed before the rude stares of these men. She was pleased that Natsatt remained standing quietly by her side. And yet she was much disappointed. For weeks she had dreamed of this meeting. She had pictured her lover rushing down to receive her, and enfolding her in his strong arms. But she had never imagined that others would be present.

"Say, Bill, what a squaw!" gasped one of the men, whose eyes were fairly bulging with astonishment. "Good heavens, man! I never thought there was such a creature in the whole country. We are certainly in luck."

Before any reply could be made Natsatt stepped forward and grasped Klitonda's hand. He had noted the quick startled look in Owindia's eyes as she listened to these personal remarks. He was fearful lest the traders should go too far, not knowing that the maiden understood every word. He believed that ere long he would be forced to clash with these men. But now he did not desire a disturbance. He was naturally of a peaceful disposition, and would endure much up to a certain point. But when that had been reached it was well for the most daring to be aware. So now by this sudden action in greeting Klitonda he hoped to divert his companions attention from Owindia.

"Great chief of the Ayana," he began, "Natsatt bids you and your daughter welcome. The white men have come to meet you. They would be your friends."

His words had the desired effect, for one by one the men stepped forward and grasped Klitonda's hand. Their friendliness pleased the chief. He looked keenly into the various faces before him, and then turned his eyes to the formidable barricade to the right. But no word did he speak. He stood quietly before them, his commanding figure drawn to its fullest height. For weeks he had been looking forward to his meeting these men who would aid him against the Chilcats. Now it had come to pass, and he was satisfied. The white men had treated him with respect, and his heart was happy.

In the meantime Natsatt had moved aside, and was standing close to Owindia. Neither spoke, for words were unnecessary. Their hearts thrilled by each other's presence. Natsatt hoped that his companions would shortly saunter away, and leave them alone. In this, however, he was disappointed. They had no inclination to depart, for after shaking hands with the chief, they turned their attention to his daughter. To them Owindia was but an ordinary Indian maiden, though more than commonly beautiful. They believed her to be about as intelligent as the native women they had met beyond the mountains.

"Come, lads, let's welcome the squaw," said Larry Dasan. "She's gripped me heart already, an' I'm going to be the first to shake hands with her."

"Ye'll have plenty of rivals," laughed Tim Burke. "The rest of us may take a hand in this little affair too. I'd go to the devil fer a squaw like that."

Natsatt's heart beat fast, and the blood surged madly through his veins as he listened to these men. He maintained his composure, however, until they began to tip winks to one another, and to utter expressions which are not lawful to record. Then he straightened himself up, and stretched out a warning hand.

"Be careful, men," he began, "for this maiden understands the English language. And, besides, I don't think you should say such words about any woman, no matter if she is an Indian."

A loud laugh was the only response to these words. The men were not in the least disconcerted. That Owindia understood what they were saying troubled them not — they were too coarse for that.

"So you're going to stand by the squaw, are ye?" sneered Larry. "That's your game, is it? Want her for yourself, eh? Squaws ain't women — they're truck. The devil made 'em. They haven't souls. They're only made for the use of men."

"If the devil makes them, he's done a fine job on this one," responded Pete Tarquell, whereupon a laugh ensued.

"Look here, men," and Natsatt moved closer to Owindia as he spoke, "my mother was an Indian — call her a squaw if you like. But she was a woman as well, true and tender. Let me tell you this: I am a half-breed, and am not ashamed of it. Speak again as you have just spoken, or meddle with this maiden, and you will answer to me."

"Oh, ye needn't do any bluffing," Larry replied. "You've shown your true colours to-night, a combination of white an' brown, or I should say white an' red. Fine mixture, that. Father a Siwash, an' mother a —"

The last words had scarcely left his lips ere Natsatt leaped toward him, and with a blow fair between the eyes, hurled him headlong to the ground. With an oath he endeavoured to regain his feet, only to go down again quicker than he rose.

"Got enough, eh?" Natsatt asked when at length Larry did not attempt to renew the contest. "You've been itching for trouble for some time past, and I hope you're satisfied now. Not much fun, is it?"

Then he returned to the rest of the men.

"Got any more remarks to make about Indian women?" he queried. "If so, now's the time to say them."

No one replied, and a deep silence prevailed. The men had seen enough of what Natsatt could do, and no one was anxious to meet Larry's ignominious fate. At that moment Ranger Dan was seen to emerge from the stockade, and hurry quickly across the open.

"What's the meaning of this?" he demanded, looking first at the prostrate man and then at the irate Natsatt.

Next he caught sight of the chief standing near.

"Who is this Indian?" he demanded, "and why didn't you tell me of his arrival?"

"He is Klitonda, chief of the Ayana," Natsatt replied, "and this is his daughter, Owindia."

At once Dan stepped up to the chief, stretched out his hand, and addressed him in Indian.

During the scene which had just taken place Klitonda had stood amazed. He did not understand what was being said, but the fight needed no words of interpretation. "So these were the white men," he thought, "the ones who were to help him against the Chilcats. What did they mean by fighting among themselves?" But when Ranger Dan spoke to him his face cleared.

"I am in charge of this Post," Dan began, "and very sorry am I that I was not here to welcome the great chief of the Ayana, and his daughter. Come into the store, and forget what these men have done."

Without a word Klitonda obeyed, and followed Dan to the Post. Owindia came behind, and Natsatt walked along by her side. The latter did not care now what his companions thought, neither did he pay any attention to the angry scowls which the defeated Larry cast upon him. If it was war the men wanted he would let them have it. But it was to be war in the open on his part, no matter what they might do. He would no longer conceal his love for the maiden. Perhaps when it was known that he was her lover and champion she would be left alone. He spoke to her in a low voice, telling her how glad he was to see her, and how long the time seemed since he had left her. Owindia looked up, and a bright smile illumined her face.

"We must never be parted again, little one," he said. "I cannot live without you."

Again she smiled, but said nothing. She was too happy for utterance. She walked as in a dream through the open door of the barricade, and then into the building. Her eyes roamed about the room in wonder, for her curiosity was much aroused by the things she saw. Owindia was but a child in the ways of the world, and this building, rude and rough though it was, made a deep impression upon her mind. She could eat but little of the food which was placed before her, and paid scarcely any attention to the conversation which was going on between her father and Ranger Dan. Natsatt sat near, and to him she told about their visit to the Ayana camps, their rejection, and the action of the score of young hunters who had followed them into the forest.

"And where are the arrows now?" questioned Natsatt, much interested in her story.

"In the canoe," was the reply. "Owindia has them carefully hidden there."

"And have you been in your lodge by the river ever since?" Natsatt asked.

"Ah, ah. Ever since. But it seemed so long. I thought the ice would never leave the river."

"You wanted to come, then? You were as anxious to see me as I was to see you?"

The light in Owindia's eyes as she turned them upon her lover's face told their own tale. It was her mute answer, and Natsatt was satisfied.

Ere long Klitonda rose to go. Ranger Dan pressed him warmly to stay there during the night, and offered the store where he and his daughter could sleep. But the chief shook his head. He preferred the open, and would there build his camp fire. In the morning he would erect a temporary lodge.

Owindia followed her father from the room, passing the men who were sitting silently on the rough benches. They had been watching the young lovers as they talked together, and in their hearts a feeling of jealousy was smouldering against the half-breed who had won the affection of this beautiful maiden of the forest.

CHAPTER X

THE PAWN IN THE GAME

WHEN morning at length broke over the land there was an unusual scene outside of the Post. A large band of Ayana Indians had arrived during the night. They had drifted in from the forest, men, women, children, and dogs, and were encamped in little groups along the river, and among the trees. It was an animated sight which met Natsatt's eyes as he wended his way toward the spot where Klitonda had erected his temporary lodge. He moved slowly, for the natives interested him. The curiosity of the children as they watched the white man did not disturb him. It was Nagu, the crafty medicine man, who arrested his attention. The creature was squatting before a small fire, with his knees drawn up almost to his chin, looking first at the Post, and then away to Klitonda's lean-to. In his eyes burned a fire of hatred, mingled with jealousy. Natsatt knew nothing of the vindictiveness of Nagu's heart toward Klitonda, and he wondered at the fierce expression he now beheld. But could he have looked deeper and have read the tumult raging within the breast of the medicine man, his own calmness would have disappeared.

Nagu feared the coming of the white men. To him they were portents of evil. Over them he had no control. He possessed no charm whereby he could bring these newcomers under his sway. He blamed Klota for turning Klitonda against him. And if a woman, who was only half white, could exert such an influence over her husband, who was a chief, what could he expect from people who were all white? He remembered only too well Klota's sharp tongue, and how she had laughed at his vain pretensions. Would not these white traders do the same, and cause him to be despised by his own people? He was, therefore, in no enviable frame of mind as he sat this morning by his smouldering camp fire brooding over his troubles. His eyes followed Natsatt as he proceeded on his way toward Klitonda's lodge. What thoughts the presence of the young man brought to Nagu's mind would be hard to divine. But at length his head drooped low until his face touched his knees. Thus he remained for some time, unheeding everything that was taking place around him.

Meanwhile Natsatt had arrived at the little lean-to, and found Klitonda and his daughter busily engaged with a pile of skins, sorting them out and laying them in various heaps near by. A smile of joy broke over Owindia's face when she saw her lover standing before her. Natsatt shook hands with the chief, and then taking a step forward caught the maiden in his arms, and imprinted a kiss upon her lips. There were no scoffing white men to witness this greeting. There was only Klitonda, who gazed with wonder at what he beheld. At once Natsatt caught Owindia's hand in his, and stood with her before the astonished father.

"Great chief of the Ayana," he began, "Natsatt loves your daughter. Will Klitonda give Owindia to Natsatt as his wife? He will be good to her. Surely the great chief will not refuse."

Klitonda looked first into his daughter's happy face, and then upon the young man standing by her side. Immediately the light of uncertainty cleared from his eyes, giving way to an expression of pleasure. He caught their disengaged left hands, and brought them together.

"The chief of the Ayana gives his daughter to the young white man," he said. "Let their hearts be one. But," and here he hesitated, "will the white man take Owindia far away beyond the mountains of the rising sun? Klitonda will miss Owindia. His heart will be very sad and lonely."

"Natsatt will not take Owindia away yet," was the reply. "He will stay here awhile, and maybe he will stay always. Would that please the chief?"

"Ah, ah," Klitonda responded. "That will be good. When the Chilcats are driven back, and the Ayana are free once more, this land will smile all the time, and Klitonda will be happy."

Thus for over an hour Natsatt stayed at the lodge, and assisted the chief and his daughter with the furs.

To be near Owindia, to look into her eyes, and to watch the varying expression of joy upon her face was supreme happiness. Owindia's heart was too full of rapture to allow her to say much. The occasional glances she gave the young man were more eloquent than many words. How could he ever bear to be separated from her? he asked himself over and over again. How could he live if anything happened to her? Suppose the Chilcats should steal her away? Or his companions, what if they should try any of their base tricks, which they had practised elsewhere, so he had heard them boast? His hands clenched firmly together, and a fierce expression leaped into his eyes, which caused Owindia to start in surprise.

"It is nothing, little one," he laughed. "I was just wondering how I could ever live without you, and what I should do if any one tried to take you from me."

"I'm not afraid of anything now," was the gentle reply. "I know you will protect me always, always."

Natsatt walked back to the Post with a light heart. The fear of what his companions might do or say could not quench the spirit of elation which dominated his very being. He moved forward with a firm step, and head held high. His chest expanded, and he drank in great draughts of the fresh morning air. How good it was to be alive, he mused. How marvellously everything had changed since Owindia's arrival. The spot seemed no longer dull and commonplace. The atmosphere breathed peace, the sun smiled its warm radiance, and the few early-returned birds twittered their joy. Everything in Nature was rejoicing with the young lover.

He found Dan standing in the door-way, looking forth upon him as he approached. Since early that morning the old Ranger had watched with the keenest interest the arrival of the natives at the store. He had sat on a stool behind the counter and noted every movement of the Indians. At first sight it would seem as if his mind was intent upon business, and anxious for barter. But it was soon evident that something else engaged his attention. He paid little or no heed to the men, but gazed earnestly upon the women. Whenever a squaw crossed the threshold he riveted his eyes upon her face. He seemed to be expecting some special person, and each time his countenance expressed disappointment as he turned away his head to observe a newcomer.

The Indians had brought no furs with them, and said nothing about trade. They examined everything in the store, however, and left apparently satisfied with their first visit. Dan waited until all had departed. Then he went to the door of the stockade and watched them moving away to their various lodges. He knew they would return and perhaps bring back valuable furs. He was accustomed to the ways of the Indians, so their silence did not trouble him.

For some time he remained almost motionless, his heavy form bulking large in the door-way. His right hand clutched at his long shaggy beard, while his faded grey eyes gazed off among the trees in an abstracted manner. His face was unusually grave, telling plainly of some weight which was pressing upon his heart. Had he not waited months for the coming of the Indians? Had he not anxiously counted the days before their expected arrival? And they had come, he had looked upon them, and had learned nothing. He knew there would be others, and the thought gave him some comfort. But this first disappointment was somewhat hard to bear.

It was a beautiful morning. Not a breath of wind stirred the tapering points of the fir trees and jack pines, whose long trailing shadows lay sprawling upon the ground. Squirrels scolded, and birds warbled as they flitted here and there. Spring had come in reality, bringing with it the great renewal of earth and air.

But Dan had eyes for none of these, neither were his ears attuned to Nature's dulcet harmonies. He was living, as he had often lived, in the past. It was a vision he beheld of a similar spring day years before. He saw another trading Post, and a fair, lithesome form walking up the trail, and humming catches of an old song. Her dark, clear eyes were sparkling with animation as she held out to him a handful of wild flowers, several sprays of which she had wreathed in her jet black hair. Oh, but she was fair to look upon, the very embodiment of health, beauty, and joy. He had something to live for then, and the days passed like an Elysian summer. But now he was old, and she was nowhere near to comfort his declining years. Where was she? What had become of her since that spring over twenty years before?

The vision suddenly faded, and in its stead Natsatt stood before him. The far away expression disappeared from his eyes, and the old look returned. He was the commander once again.

"Where are the rest of the men?" he asked. "I haven't seen any of them for some time."

"I don't know," was the reply. "I haven't seen them, either. Perhaps they are strolling about among the lodges having friendly chats with the Indians. I myself have just been over to see the chief."

"Have a care, lad," and Dan laid a heavy hand upon the young man's shoulder as he spoke. "There is to be no fooling, remember, with the Indian women out yon. By heavens! if I catch any of you men meddling with those squaws I'll shoot you like dogs that have been worrying sheep. I've never had any Post degraded when I was in command, and I'm determined that this won't be the first. My word is law here, and I'll be judge and executioner combined if necessary. When I wanted a woman from the camp I took her, and we were lawfully joined together. But I strongly advise you to leave them alone entirely. There should be some white woman beyond the mountains who'd be only too glad to marry such a lad as you."

During this speech, which was a long one for the Ranger to make, Natsatt's face at first flushed with anger. This, however, gradually faded, as he noted the pathos in Dan's voice.

"I hope you don't take me for a human bloodhound," he replied. "I am not a saint by any means, but I have never harmed a squaw yet, and I have always lived in the North. My mother, as you know, was an Indian woman, and for her sake at least should I not respect the women of her own race?"

"Sure, sure," responded Dan. "But—"

"Will you please hear me through?" Natsatt interrupted. "I might as well tell you now as at any other time what is on my mind. I visited the chief's lodge this morning for the purpose of seeing his daughter, Owindia. Of all maidens I have ever met she is the fairest, and I believe the noblest. I love her, and I know she loves me. Why should we not, therefore, marry when the opportunity arrives?"

Ranger Dan looked keenly into the animated face before him, and his heart warmed toward the young man more than ever. He reached out and seized Natsatt's hand in his.

"Lad," he said, "I believe your heart is right, and that you love the maiden. It would be no use, I see, to try to turn you from your purpose. But wait until you can be joined in holy wedlock. I have seen too many unholy unions, and they never prosper. They must be sealed in the presence of the Great Father above. I must see the lass myself."

"But did you not see her, sir?" Natsatt questioned. "She was standing near her father last night by the bank of the river."

"Was she? Well, I didn't notice her. But come, lad, I have something to say to you to-day. My heart and mind have been deeply stirred by what you have just told me. Come into the store where no one will hear us. We must be alone."

Somewhat surprised, Natsatt followed his leader into the building and seated himself upon a stool by Dan's side.

"You have wondered," the Ranger began, "why a man at my advanced age should undertake such a work as this. Why should I wish to spend so much money upon building a fort in the wilderness with so many odds against me? But, lad, this Post is only a pawn in the game I am playing. There is a purpose back of it which is very near my heart. Listen and I will tell you.

"Years ago I maintained a trading Post among the Indians far to the south, right amidst the mountains. My wife was a native woman whom I had married years before. We had several children born to us, but only one lived — Klota we called her. She was the pride of my heart, and as I watched her grow and develop into all the charms of maidenhood, my cup of joy was full to overflowing. We were great companions, and her voice was like the sweetest music to my ears. Often she would ramble about the forest, and return bringing beautiful wild flowers she had gathered. Then one day never to be forgotten, she disappeared so mysteriously as not to leave a trace behind. She had been away as usual, and when she did not return at night we became greatly alarmed. Search was made, but all in vain. Days passed into weeks and weeks into months, but no word ever came of our darling Klota. The blow was a heavy one to my wife. She faded, and at length left me. I laid her to rest there by the trading Post, and abandoned the place. No longer would I live amid scenes where I had experienced such mingled joy and sorrow. From that time I devoted my life in seeking to find some trace of my lost child. At times I believed that some accident had befallen her, that either she had been drowned, or torn to pieces by bears, for savage grizzlies were common in those parts. But my principal conviction led me to think that she had been stolen away by maurading Indians. Never for a moment did I imagine that she had been taken westward. What seemed to be an impassable range of mountains barred the way, and beyond was an unknown region. No, she had not gone in that direction I felt certain. Either South, East or North could she have been taken, if taken at all. I, therefore, determined to scour the land in the vague hope of finding my child.

"Thus for almost twenty years I spent most of my time in visiting the numerous camps. No band of Indians was too isolated for me to ferret out. I was looked upon as eccentric by the white traders and trappers. They gave me the name of "Ranger" Dan, a title which has stuck to me ever since. They thought I was travelling for trading purposes, and little realised the object of my lonely wanderings. At length when the last spark of hope had almost died, a ray of light pierced the gloom which gave me new heart to continue my search.

"I had penetrated some distance into the interior, and while there I met several Indians who had ventured far westward beyond the Rocky Mountains. They gave me the first information I had ever received of this region, and of the great river flowing through the land, which the natives called the 'Ayan.' They related, among many interesting things, the story of a maiden who had been stolen away from a trading Post years before by a band of Indians from a savage tribe living along the coast. As they were hurrying along with the girl they suddenly met a powerful Ayana Indian. The captive had thrown herself at his feet and pleaded with him to save her. This he did by hurling himself upon the Coast Indians, and killing every one. The victor had then taken the maiden to himself as his wife, and her beauty and charm of manner were known by all the Ayana people."

Here Dan paused and remained lost in thought.

"And was she your daughter?" Natsatt eagerly asked. "Was it Klota?"

"I am not certain," was the reply. "I could learn nothing more from the Indians. However, the more I thought about it the more I became convinced that the stolen maiden was my own darling child. But there is one thing which has sorely puzzled my mind. If Klota was that captive, why did she never come back?"

"Perhaps the Indian who married her refused to let her do so," Natsatt suggested.

"I have thought of that," Dan replied, while a sigh escaped his lips. "It is hard to tell of the many things which have been beating through my brain. Anyway, this expedition, and the erection of the Post are the outcome of what I heard. Nothing may come of it all, and in that case I shall be the heavy loser. But it was my last hope. A trading Post would be the only way by which the Indians could be speedily gathered. Thus, you see, this Post is merely a pawn, though an important one, in the great heart game I am playing. But, there, we have talked enough for to-day. You know my secret, and may be able to give me much assistance in my search. God grant that we may hear some word soon."

CHAPTER XI

FOES WITHOUT AND WITHIN

NATSATT had much to think over after he left the Ranger. He could not get the story he had just heard out of his mind. His thoughts reverted to Owindia, and what Klitonda had told him about her mother. She had white blood in her veins, and he had the dim impression that the chief had said her name was Klota. Of this, however, he was not certain. Formerly it was no more than of ordinary interest, as east of the mountains it was nothing unusual for Indians to marry half-breed women. But since he had heard Dan's story he was anxious to know more. He would make careful inquiries, however, before saying anything to the Ranger about the matter. It would be better to find out definitely before filling his old leader's mind with any false hopes.

He noticed that now his companions treated him with marked coolness. They would converse together, but whenever he approached they would either disperse or maintain a frigid silence. Larry, especially, favoured him with surly looks. Revenge was plainly written in his eyes, making Natsatt realise that here was a man who needed careful watching. Such action on the part of these men only caused the young half-breed to be more on his guard than ever. For himself he cared but little. He was accustomed to the brutal tactics of rough, heartless men. He did not fear the entire gang, as in his heart he believed they were too cowardly to offer him any bodily harm. But with regard to Owindia it was different, and he became fearful as he thought of what they might attempt to do to her.

After supper, which was eaten in unusual silence, Natsatt left the building and strolled over to Klitonda's lodge. Here he found Owindia alone, for her father was away visiting several Indian camps. She was sitting on a large bear-skin, gazing intently upon several objects before her, and did not hear Natsatt's soft footsteps. But when she at length turned her head and beheld her lover standing near, she gave a slight cry of joy, and rose quickly to her feet.

"And what is my little one doing to-night?" Natsatt asked, as he enfolded her in his arms, and imprinted a kiss upon her lips.

"Counting the tokens," was the reply. "See, they are all here, the blood-stained arrows the Ayana hunters brought. Owindia keeps them safe."

"Do you think they will ever be needed?" Natsatt questioned, at the same time stooping and picking up the arrows. "My! they are well made, and sharp too."

"But none too sharp for the Chilcats," was the low response. "Oh, that there were ten times the number! then Owindia's heart would be lighter."

"Do not worry, little one. All those Coast dogs cannot harm you now when I am here to protect you. You are not afraid, are you?"

"Not now," and Owindia turned her love-lit eyes up to the young man's face. "But sometimes I have a strange feeling of dread here," and she placed her hand to her heart as she spoke. "It is the same to-night. It tells Owindia that the Chilcats are coming, and will try to steal her away, and kill her people."

"Come, little one," Natsatt commanded, "and let us walk down by the river. You have been brooding too much about the Chilcats. The night is fine, and we will listen to the music of the water, and forget all troubles."

Owindia at once obeyed her lover's request, and together they wended their way among the various lodges until the edge of the stream was reached. They walked slowly along the bank for some distance above the village. Here they seated themselves upon an old fallen tree, and looked out upon the river flowing sullenly by. It was a balmy evening, with not a breath of wind stirring the trees. Overhead, the stars were tumbling out one by one, and twinkling down upon the young lovers. Sounds of voices drifted up from the camps, mingled with the occasional snarl or bark of a dog. But Natsatt and Owindia had neither eyes nor ears for what was taking place around them. They were too much absorbed in each other to care about anything else. They were living in a little world of their own, with not a jarring note to disturb the sweet harmony. Forgotten for the time were the maiden's fears. She felt secure in the presence of the strong man at her side. And the many things he was telling her held her spell-bound. He related to her again the story of his own past life, his numerous wanderings, and the marvellous things he had seen. Some day he would take her to see them for herself, so he told her. They would have, too, a little home of their own, where fear of the Chilcats would never worry them.

"How strange it will all be," Owindia at length remarked. "I know so little of the ways of the white people that I am afraid they will laugh at me. I shall make so many stupid mistakes that you will feel ashamed of me at times."

"Never, little one," was the emphatic reply. "I shall be proud of you. Even now you are much superior to many white women I have met. You are beautiful, gentle, and remember so much of what your mother taught you. She had white blood in her veins, and was very wise, was she not?"

"Ah, ah. She seemed to know everything. She said she wanted me to grow up to be a good woman. She would often watch me for a long time without saying anything. Sometimes she had a far away look in her eyes, and when I would ask her what she was thinking about, she would give a start, and laughingly say that she was dreaming about her father and mother, and of the days when she was a little child."

"Did your mother ever tell you why she left her happy home?" Natsatt eagerly asked, feeling sure that now he was to find an answer to the question which had been puzzling Ranger Dan for long years.

"Ah, ah. She told me something, but not all. She said she had been stolen away by a band of cruel Coast Indians one bright summer afternoon, as she was wandering in the forest near her father's home. She had pleaded with them, but they had only laughed at her tears, and had hurried her forward. Then they met an Ayana Indian, my father, who rescued her. That is about all I know."

"But why did not your father take your mother back?" Natsatt questioned. "Did she never wish to return to her old home? Did she not know how her father and mother would grieve about her?"

"Ah, but she did go back. My father took her; but the old home was deserted. Some Indians they met told her that her mother was dead, and that her father had gone never to come back again."

"Oh, I see," Natsatt mused, half to himself. "So there was nothing for your mother to do but to return with her husband?"

"Nothing."

"And your mother often talked about her parents?"

"Ah, ah. Very much; but mostly about her father. She said he was so kind, and she loved him dearly."

"Would you like to meet your mother's father some day, little one?" Natsatt asked. "Have you ever thought about him?"

Owindia looked up quickly into her lover's face, but under the pall of night she could detect no hidden meaning there.

"Have I thought of him?" she at length slowly replied. "I have dreamed of him by night and by day. I have always believed that he is living yet, and that sometime we shall meet. Maybe when we go beyond the great mountains of the rising sun I shall see him. But how sorry he will be when he hears that his daughter Klota is dead. He will grieve sorely, for he loved her."

To these words Natsatt made no response. He was thinking deeply of what he had just heard. There was no doubt now, and he would be able to tell Dan all he had learned. But there was a difficulty in the way. He knew that the Ranger would feel badly when he heard about Klota's death, and that would be only natural. But would he at once abandon the Post, and go back beyond the mountains? In that case Owindia would have to go too, and would she be willing to leave her father so soon?

"Why is Natsatt so still? Why does he not speak?" a voice pleaded at his side, which roused him from his reverie.

"I was thinking, little one," he replied, "and for a moment forgot where I was. But, come, we had better go back. It is dark, and your father will wonder where you are, should he return to the lodge and not find you there."

Together they slowly retraced their steps along the river. On their left stretched the great forest, black and silent. Ahead they could see the lights of the numerous camp fires. Not a thought of danger entered their minds so much taken up were they with each other. They were passing close to a heavy thicket of trees, when, without the least warning, two forms leaped upon Natsatt, and bore him to the ground. A half-smothered cry of fright escaped Owindia's lips, telling plainly that something, perhaps a hand was placed over her mouth.

Natsatt at once realised the cowardly nature of the attack, and the hot blood of a hundred generations surged madly through his veins. In falling he had partly loosened his assailants' grip, and before they could fully recover he dealt one a savage blow with his clenched fist, and sent him reeling backwards. Springing nimbly aside he met the second with a kick that doubled him up, causing him to give vent to a deep groan of pain. Not waiting for another charge Natsatt bounded to Owindia's side, as she was being borne away among the trees. He could see very little, but could hear the noise her captor was making. No lioness bereft of her cub could have hurled herself forward with greater impetuosity than did the enraged lover. He reached the maiden's side, and ripped away the arms which were holding her fast. Dropping his burden the cowardly cur turned to face the half-breed. But he was as a child in the clutch of that passion-inflamed man. Natsatt's hands reached for the villain's throat, and gripped with the suddenness and intensity of a steel-trap. For a few seconds there was a wild struggle, a gurgling, choking noise, and then the sound of a form dropping heavily to the earth.

"Lie there, you dog," at length came from Natsatt's lips, as he groped his way to where Owindia was standing. "Where are you, little one? Come quick, and let's get out of this. There's no time to lose."

Finding the maiden, he hurried with her as fast as possible through the rough and night-enshrouded forest. He breathed a sigh of relief when at last the lights of the camp fires twinkled among the trees. His first impulse was to take Owindia to her father's lodge, and then hasten to the Post to appraise Dan of the base attack which had just been made. This idea, however, was soon banished from his mind, for upon reaching the open where the Indians were encamped he found them all greatly agitated, and talking in a most excited manner.

"What is it?" he asked of the first Indian he met.

"The Chilcats have come!" was the terrified reply. "They are over there in the forest. They are hiding, ready to attack us!"

Natsatt waited to hear no more. He went with Owindia to her father's lodge, where he found the chief sitting calmly at the entrance of the rude abode, as if nothing unusual was taking place. He tried to persuade Klitonda to come with his daughter into the Post. But the former shook his head. No, he preferred to remain where he was. He did not fear the Chilcat dogs.

"Then let Owindia come," the young man pleaded. "Let her be safe, anyway."

The maiden looked first into the face of her lover, and then at her father. A struggle was going on within her breast. There were tears in her eyes, when at last she took Natsatt's hand in hers, and placed it to her lips.

"Owindia must stay with her father," she simply said. "He will need her now more than ever."

Natsatt realised that her words were final, and that no inducement could shake her resolve. Dan would need him at this critical moment, he well knew, so he must not delay longer. Bidding farewell to the chief and Owindia, he left the lodge, and hurried across the open toward the Post.

CHAPTER XII

THE MESSENGER

KLITONDA knew of the news which was agitating his people, for he had been the first to see two terrified Ayana Indians speeding by his lodge with the tidings of dire woe. But he had asked no questions, and did not even go forth to discuss the matter with his people. That they would huddle together in fear, and then speed away like frightened rabbits he was well aware. Of what use, therefore, would it be to talk to them, and try to arouse them to definite determined action? All of his talking in the past had seemed in vain, so of what avail would words be now with the enemy so near? Only upon the white men did he feel that he could depend for assistance. But how few they were. It was true, they had their strong barricade, and deadly guns would guard every loop-hole. But the Chilcats were wily, and if they had come in great numbers it would be impossible to withstand them for any length of time. His mind turned to the score of young hunters who had made their vow of allegiance, and had given their tokens. With their support a strong stand could be made. He believed that they were not far off, awaiting for the blood-stained arrows.

But whom could he send? He looked toward Owindia, seated just within the entrance of the lodge. She was watching her father's face, and trying to interpret the thoughts which were beating through his brain. A small fire outside made it possible for her to see his features quite distinctly.

His eyes glowed with a fierce light, such as she had seen there the night her mother had been killed. He sat bolt upright, with every muscle of his body tense and rigid. He was not like the tiger waiting for the onset of the hunters, and ready to spring forth with savage destruction. He was more like a scarred veteran of a hundred fights, not afraid of the conflict, yet cautious, and wary. He wished to strike, but only at the right moment, with such force and suddenness as to repulse his adversaries with overwhelming confusion.

"Little one," he suddenly began, "have you the tokens safe?"

"Ah, ah, father. They are over there," and the maiden pointed to a corner of the lodge. "Do you want them?"

"We must use them now, Owindia," her father replied. "The Chilcats are near, and some one must take them to the young hunters. I cannot go, as I must stay and help the white men. Will you—?"

The question died upon his lips, for suddenly without a sound there appeared at the door of the lodge an Indian of the dreaded Chilcat tribe. One lightning glance was sufficient for Klitonda to realise the identity of the stranger. He leaped to his feet, and seized his hunting axe which was lying near. Owindia shrank fearfully back into a corner of the lodge at the terrible expression upon her father's face.

The visitor neither moved nor exhibited the least sign of alarm. He stood calmly in the door-way, watching Klitonda's infuriated demeanour. His coolness caused the chief to hesitate as he was in the act of raising the weapon for the blow. Had the man betrayed the slightest degree of fear Klitonda would have smitten him to the ground without the least compunction. But brave himself, he always admired it in others, even though they were his most deadly enemies. He paused, and glared upon the intruder.

"Why does not the chief strike?" the Chilcat queried in a quiet voice.

"What does the dog want in Klitonda's lodge?" came the fierce reply. "Does he come here to mock the chief of the Ayana? Are the Coast dogs waiting outside to kill their enemy, and steal his daughter? They will never have her, no, not while Klitonda has breath in his body."

"Let the chief of the Ayana put aside his axe," the Chilcat responded. "Let him sit down. Klukwan has come with a message from his leader who is waiting for his return."

"No, Klitonda will stand. He will not sit while a Chilcat dog is within his lodge. Whatever you have to say, say it at once. Speak."

"Does the chief of the Ayana know that the Chilcats are near; that they are lying among the trees? Does he know how many, and how strong they are? Does not his heart tremble as he hears this? The Chilcats have come from far. They know that the white men are here, and would take the pelts from the Ayana Indians. They know, too, that Klitonda's heart is one with the traders from beyond the mountains of the rising sun. Will the Chilcats allow this? Will they hide like jack-rabbits among the trees, and let the white men take the furs? No. They have come for revenge. They are ready to drive back the white people. Then let the chief of the Ayana beware, for he cannot escape them. The Chilcats are swift as wolves, and their fangs are long and sharp."

"Klitonda does not fear the Coast dogs," was the savage reply. "They are not wolves; they are dogs. Let them come; let them bark, that is all they can do. The Chilcats have no heart. They crawl among the trees, they sneak up in the night. Their hearts are like water. Why should Klitonda be afraid of papooses? Bah!"

"The Ayana chief is surely talking wind," the visitor responded. "The Chilcats are no dogs, and their hearts are not weak. Were their hearts weak when they drove back the Ayana braves in the great battle at Tagish Lake? Does Klitonda wish to meet them to-night? Does he long to see the Chilcats come from among the trees like hungry wolves? Does he wish to see his people killed around him, and he himself carried as a captive back to the Coast? How could the proud Klitonda endure that?"

"The Chilcat dogs will never take Klitonda beyond the mountains," was the fierce rejoinder.

"How can he help it?"

"He will fight, and the white men will fight too. Has Klukwan seen how strong the white traders are behind their wooden walls?"

"Bah! What do the Chilcats care for a row of trees? Walls of stone cannot stop them, and how then can those sticks?"

"But there are men behind those walls who know how to fight. Their guns roar like thunder, flash lightning, and vomit death from their mouths."

"Bah! What do the Coast tribe care for thunder, lightning, or death? The Great Spirit will fight for them. He will rend the rocks in pieces to help the Chilcats, for they are his children."

Klitonda did not at once reply to these words, but stood gazing upon the stranger as if lost in thought.

"Then for what purpose has Klukwan come to the lodge of the chief of the Ranges?" he at length demanded. "Is it to mock him? If the Chilcats are so strong what are they waiting for? Why do they send one of their number to Klitonda? Go back and tell your leader that he is nothing but a cowardly dog."

"Klukwan has come," was the slow response, "with a message from his chief's son. He would tell Klitonda how strong are the Chilcats, and how useless it is for him to fight against them. But the chief's son is brave and noble. He does not wish to kill Klitonda, and his people. He would spare them."

"What does the chief's son want?" Klitonda asked, while his brow darkened and he turned toward Owindia. The Chilcat saw the look, and the expression upon the father's face.

"Ah, ah. The chief of the Ayana has thought aright," the messenger returned. "Let him give his daughter to the son of the Chilcat chief, and Klitonda will be safe. But the white traders must go, and never come back again. The Ayana Indians, chief and all must trade only with the Chilcats. Such is the message. Klukwan has spoken."

During these words Owindia had risen partly to her feet. In her eyes had leaped a look of wild fear. Her whole body trembled. The Chilcat brave seemed to fascinate her, like a bird charmed by a serpent. She glanced alternately at Klitonda and then at the stranger. She noted the look upon her father's face, and well knew what his answer would be. She saw him raise his arm, and beheld the hunting axe lifted to strike. Then with a sudden bound she sprang to her feet, and caught the arm as it was in the act of descending. The weapon fell not upon the head of the visitor but upon one of the poles supporting the lodge, which snapped in twain as if it had been a match. The Chilcat stood as if rooted to the spot. He had not even tried to evade the blow, and not a sign of fear could be detected upon his face. But his eyes, looking straight into Owindia's, shone with the light of gratitude. Brave himself he could appreciate, savage though he was, bravery in others, and especially in a woman. Her beauty appealed to him. He noted every movement of her graceful body, the long, slender arm which reached up to stay the fatal axe, and the deep flush mantling her nut-brown cheeks. He had heard much about this maiden, and he realised now how true were the reports concerning her which had drifted over the mountains to the coast. Little wonder, then, that the chief's son desired to possess her. What Chilcat brave who would not be willing to fight, nay even to die for her.

For an instant Klitonda looked into his daughter's face, and his rage was somewhat subdued by surprise.

"Child! Child!" he demanded. "What do you mean? Why didn't you let me finish the Chilcat dog?"

"Would you kill a defenceless man, father?" she replied. "Has he not come into our lodge? When did Klitonda ever do such a thing before? Surely he is not himself to-night."

For a few brief heart beats the chief looked intently upon his daughter. Then his face softened, and the muscles of his body relaxed.

"You are right, little one," he assented. "Klitonda forgets himself to-night. But, oh, there was reason. They would steal Owindia, my only child, away from me, and they have sent this dog with the message. "See," and he turned fiercely upon the Chilcat, "take this axe to the chief's son. Show him how heavy and sharp it is. Tell him that Klitonda, chief of the Ayana, and chief of the Ranges from a long line of ancestors, will never give up his daughter. He will die first, and Owindia will die with him. Go, leave my lodge, lest my rage get the better of me."

Silently the Chilcat reached out his hand and seized the axe. Quickly he turned, and without a glance at either the chief or his daughter left the lodge. Owindia, who was close to the entrance, slipped out after him, leaving her father standing alone, sombre and thoughtful. Klitonda did not notice her departure, for there were too many things passing through his mind. He was thinking of the white men at the Post, and also of the score of young hunters who had followed him into the forest with the blood-stained tokens. Ere long Owindia returned, and sat quietly in a corner of the lodge unnoticed by her father. Upon her face was an expression of deep determination. The light of a great resolve shone in her eyes. No longer did her body tremble with apprehension. An inward strength seemed to possess her, which calmed her every fear.

At length Klitonda dropped upon the fur-skin robe at his feet, drew his knees up to his chin, and remained a long time in deep, silent thought. Night drew on apace, and the confusion around the various camp fires gradually subsided. But deeper than all else was the silence which reigned within Klitonda's lodge, where father and daughter kept watch, each racked with wild, varying emotions.

CHAPTER XIII

A MAIDEN'S WILL

WHILE Klitonda stood face to face with the Chilcat messenger strange, deep thoughts were surging through Owindia's nimble brain. She knew that her father did not fully comprehend the seriousness of their situation. She felt sure that what the Chilcats said they would do they would perform to the bitter end. They had been victors too long to be lightly turned aside from any object upon which they had set their hearts. Her father had contemptuously called them dogs, but she knew that they were dogs in the real sense of the term, keen, swift, and relentless. She studied as only an anxious woman can, the face of the visitor in an effort to read his thoughts. She admired his coolness, and calm indifference to danger. Were all the Chilcats as brave as this one? she wondered. If the messenger was so full of courage what must the chief's son be like who had sent him forth? What message would this man take back with him? How would he interpret her father's action, and how long would it be before the Chilcats began the attack? She thought of her father, her own people, and of her lover within the Post. The end she could easily foresee, and a tremor shook her body. They would be slain, and she herself carried away captive. With her loved ones gone what would there be in life for her? But with them alive and safe there would still be hope in her heart.

She remembered the story her mother had frequently told her of the maiden, who long ago had offered up her life to save her people. She had been thrilled by the tale, and often she had recalled it as she sat alone in the lodge out in the wilderness. At times she had thought that she herself would like to do such a deed as that, and she pictured the pride which would thrill the hearts of her own people as they related the story to their little ones around the camp fires. That was the dream; but here was the stern reality with none of the golden halo of romance.

Such were the ideas which occupied her mind as she crouched there in the corner. But when she had leaped to her feet, and diverted the blow of the descending axe she became firmly convinced as to the course she should pursue. After her father's wild action she well knew that the Chilcats would give no quarter unless something intervened, and that something must be herself. She watched the messenger receive the axe, and as he left the lodge she glided silently after him out into the night. He was moving toward the forest, but paused when he heard the light steps behind. The reflection of the fire dimly illumined his features, which expressed surprise at the sight of the maiden. For an instant Owindia's heart faltered, but seeing that the Indian looked not unkindly upon her, she took courage and glanced up beseechingly into his face.

"What does the Ayana squaw want?" the messenger questioned, noting her embarrassment.

"Will the Chilcat braves wait until to-morrow?" she asked in a low voice. "Will they stay until then from making the attack?"

"Why does the squaw request this?" was the reply. "Why should the Chilcats wait? Klukwan has the Ayana chief's answer. See, here is the token of battle," and he held forth the hunting axe.

"Ah, ah. Owindia knows. But there is another way. If the Chilcat braves will wait until to-morrow night just as the sun is sinking beyond the tops of the trees, Owindia will be at the great white rock in the valley with a different message."

"And what will that message be?" the Chilcat queried. "The chief's son must know, or else he will think that Klukwan is a sly fox, and is playing with him."

"Tell the chief's son," and here Owindia straightened herself up in a firm dignified manner, "that his heart's desire will be there."

"What! the Ayana squaw?"

"Ah, ah."

"And she will be the message?"

"Ah, ah."

"The squaw will not fail? If she does not come it will be bad for Klukwan."

"Bah! Owindia is the daughter of Klitonda; she has white blood in her veins. She does not lie. She will be there. Go!"

Re-entering the lodge Owindia sat down upon a bear-skin rug, and gave herself up to thoughts of no enviable nature. She glanced often at her father's immovable figure before her. But no help could she expect from him. She had to bear her burden alone, and even Natsatt could not assist her. To mention her purpose to either her father or her lover would only mean the defeat of her plan. How dark and terrible appeared the future. To leave the land of her birth, to forsake her own people, and never again to look upon the face of the one who had brought such rapturous joy into her young life. She would see Natsatt, no doubt, on the morrow, but that would be the last time, and she must betray nothing of her scheme to him. How she longed for her mother as she crouched there. It seemed that she had grown so old and care-worn of late. She thought of her happy girl-hood days, when she had played by the river, and rested so contentedly at night by her mother's side. Was she thinking of her? She mused, and did she know anything about her child's troubles?

Thus through the long hours, she sat and thought, starting at the slightest noise, thinking that the Chilcats were upon them. Toward morning she laid her weary head upon a pillow of furs, and tired out, slept. It was late when she awoke. Her father had been long astir, and had their frugal breakfast ready. He was unusually talkative this morning, and more tender, so Owindia thought. He confided to her the plan which had been revolving through his brain during the night.

"Little one," he began, "the Chilcats are near, and will soon be upon us. There is no time to lose. Where are the tokens?"

"Safe, father," Owindia replied, going at once into the lodge, and bringing forth the score of arrows. "But what will you do with them?"

"Carry them to the hills, little one. The hunters, I believe, are fishing at the Great Lake. By travelling fast one should reach the place by night."

"And are you going yourself, father?" Owindia questioned. "Is there not a young hunter in camp who will go? What about Tesla or Atlin? Each is strong, and swift as the wild goose."

"Bah! They are no good. They make a big talk when they know they are safe. But when the Chilcats are near they are frightened at their own shadows. It is the same with most of the Ayana braves. No, Klitonda must take the tokens himself. At first he thought of sending his daughter, but that would not do. The way is too long, and there are many dangers. You stay in old Kluan's lodge to-night, but if the Coast dogs come, go into the Post; you will be safe there."

With a sad heart Owindia helped her father make ready for his journey. Then she bade him good-bye, and watched him until the shadowy forest hid him from view. She believed that she should never see him again. Amid the trees whither he had just disappeared she too would soon go, and what then?

Some time she spent within the lodge, gathering together her few belongings. Most of them were simple trinkets, several of which had been given to her by her mother. Next, she braided her long black hair, and coiled it deftly about her head in the same manner as her mother had often done. She had no mirror in which to look, and, therefore, had no idea what a pleasing picture she presented as she sat there alone. Natsatt had told her time and time again that she was very beautiful, more so in fact than any woman he had ever seen. She wanted him to admire her very much on this last day he should ever look upon her face. How would he like the way she had her hair arranged? she asked herself.

Leaving the lodge she walked slowly toward the river among the various camps pitched near. She noted that most of the Indians were packing up their belongings, and some had already taken them to their canoes. Several had departed, for the arrival of the Chilcats had stricken terror into their hearts. Reaching the bank of the river Owindia walked along the shore for some distance. She wished to be alone, to think over the step she was about to take. Seating herself at length upon a stone she gazed down pensively at the water flowing by close at her feet. It was a warm day, and the sun poured its hot beams upon her head. The birds twittered among the branches of the trees, and darted here and there through the air. Squirrels scolded, and butterflies zig-zagged to and fro. But Owindia heeded none of these. Her mind was upon other things, and she had neither eyes nor ears for the beautiful things of nature. Time did not matter to her now, for the day had to be passed somehow. There was no attraction for her at the camp since her father left. As for Natsatt, she almost dreaded meeting him. Her love was so strong and deep that she feared when in his presence her resolve might weaken. Perhaps it would be better to stay where she was away from the Post, and never see him again. She had about made up her mind to move farther up the river around a bend in the distance, and there remain hidden from view, when a step near arrested her attention. Glancing quickly around she beheld the very person of her thoughts rapidly approaching. Forgotten for the moment was her firmly-settled resolve, and a bright smile illumined her face as she rose to meet him.

"Why, little one, I have been looking everywhere for you," Natsatt cried, as he caught her in his arms. "So you have been sitting here all by yourself. What have you been doing?"

"Only thinking," the maiden replied, looking up lovingly into his face.

"Ah, that was what you were doing, eh? Thinking of me, no doubt, and wondering why I was so long in coming. But I couldn't find you for some time."

"I was thinking about you but the Chilcats would come into my mind too."

At the mention of the Chilcats Natsatt's face became grave, and his sunny smile disappeared.

"Yes, Owindia," he said, "we are in a serious position. The Coast Indians have come in strong force, and unless we can make terms with them they will be upon us in a short time, perhaps to-night. I cannot believe that they will attack us without sending some one first to have a talk with Ranger Dan. Surely they do not wish to destroy the white men, but merely force them to leave the country."

"And will the white traders go if the Chilcats demand it?" Owindia eagerly asked.

"No. Our leader would never consent to that, I am sure. Remember, we can put up a great fight behind those walls if all the men will only stand firm. But if we do go, Owindia must go too. If not, Natsatt will stay."

"The white men must go," Owindia replied, and then she told about the Chilcat messenger's visit to her father's lodge the previous night. She mentioned only two of the demands which had been made, and was careful to say nothing about herself. "They may come to-night," she said in conclusion, "and if the white traders do not go the Ayana people will be destroyed. They cannot fight long against the Chilcats. Oh, let them go while there is time!"

"Don't be afraid, little one," and Natsatt placed his arm tenderly around the maiden as he spoke. He noted that she was trembling, and attributed her fear to the presence of the enemy. "But come, I must go back and tell Dan what you have told me. It will be necessary for him to know what demands the Chilcats have made. And you must come with me, darling, into the Post. It will not do for you to stay outside, for you will be in great danger. All last night I worried about you. You will be safe within the walls. Ranger Dan and Natsatt will see to that."

But when the young man rose the maiden clung to his arm.

"Don't go yet," she pleaded. "Stay a little longer. Owindia cannot go into the Post now. She must wait awhile. Will not Natsatt make some music? Owindia's heart is full of fear, and the sweet sounds will help her to be strong."

Natsatt needed no second bidding, so drawing forth the mouth-organ he at once began to play. Forgotten for a time were the Chilcats, and as he played Owindia felt her courage rise. The chord of high resolve within her breast was again stirred. The old feeling of fear was banished, and she was willing to do, and to die if necessary for those she loved. Little did Natsatt realise what thoughts were passing through the mind of the young woman at his side. He believed that she had told him all, and that no veil separated their hearts of love. He was rapturously happy himself in the presence of Owindia. The charm of her face and manner appealed to him more than ever. And even when they rose to go Owindia delayed, threw her arms about his neck, and looked into his eyes with such beseeching tenderness that the young man was completely transported with joy. He was still in a state of bliss as he left her to make his way to the Post, promising that when night fell he would come for her to take her to a place of safety behind the wooden walls. Owindia had not said that she would go. She had merely told him to wait, and with this answer Natsatt had to be content.

Owindia walked slowly back to her father's lodge. Occasionally she turned and looked longingly toward the large door of the barricade through which her lover had gone. She paid no heed to the Indians, neither did she see the medicine man intently watching her some distance off. She did not know that he had been observing her as she walked along by Natsatt's side. She could not see the look upon the crafty creature's face, nor the malignant gleam which shone in his eyes. At the entrance of the lodge she seated herself, and watched the sun as hour after hour it dipped lower in the west. At length it swung just above the tops of the tallest fir trees, ready for its final plunge out of sight. Then Owindia rose to her feet, entered the lodge, and picking up a sharp knife slipped it within the bosom of her dress. Next she seized the small bundle she had made ready, hurried outside, gave one final glance toward the Post, and disappeared among the trees.

CHAPTER XIV

CAPTURED

WHEN Klitonda left his lodge on that warm summer morning, he plunged at once into the forest, and struck a course straight for a mountain peak far away in the distance, towering high above its fellows. At its base lay a placid lake, abounding in fish, where he believed many of the Indians were encamped. Here he expected to find the young hunters upon whom his hopes were fixed.

A rough, crooked trail wound through the wilderness, and along this he travelled. Occasionally he paused and listened, for he knew that on his right, and not far away, the Chilcats were lying in ambush. He suspected that a number of the band would be scouring the forest for game, and it would, therefore, be necessary for him to advance with the greatest caution. Hardly a sound did he make as he glided stealthily among the trees, his eyes and ears keenly alert to every object and noise. Open wild meadows at times stretched out before him, and these he skirted, keeping well within the sheltering shadows of the friendly borders.

He was thinking deeply as he proceeded, for much was at stake, and he knew that in order to win out against the Coast tribe strategy rather than physical force would be necessary. Klitonda was no mere machine speeding through the forest, but a stern vital reality, whose breast throbbed with mingled emotions of hatred toward the Chilcats, and an intense love for his only child, and the welfare of his people.

After clearing what he believed to be the extreme outward limits of danger, he no longer paused to listen. The Chilcats would not be so far afield, so he imagined. He felt secure now, and in this sense of security lay his immediate danger. He became less cautious, and gave himself up to various plans for the overcoming of his enemies. But Klitonda might have known that he was never safe when the Coast dogs were anywhere within the borders of the country. He did not know that several of the hated tribe had been sent out to ascertain the whereabouts of the various Ayana bands. They had been travelling for some time, and coming to a little stream which purled gently through the forest, had stopped to drink, and to rest beneath the shade of a large fir tree.

All unconscious of the presence of his enemies, Klitonda was hurrying on his way. For weary miles his course took him through a region where not a drop of water could be obtained. Here the ground was parched and dry. The few trees, and what scanty vegetation there was, were stunted, and maintained a precarious existence. Fires had swept over the land years before, and large trunks stood out gaunt and lifeless amid this scene of desolation. Klitonda longed for water to cool his parched lips. The heat was almost unbearable, stifling in its intensity, with not a breath of air to give a moment's respite. In addition to this there were innumerable swarms of flies. They were persistent creatures, surrounding the traveller, and attacking him with the utmost ferocity. At times they almost blinded him as he hurried onward. He had been accustomed to these pests from infancy, but never had he known them to be as bad as they were on this day. He remembered how his parents had often built smudge fires, around which men, women, and children would crowd, preferring the blinding smoke to the torture of the insects.

Klitonda now looked eagerly forward to the little stream, which he knew was not far off. There he could stop, slake his burning thirst, and eat some of the dried moose meat he had brought with him. He had thrown aside all precaution, and with bent head speeded down the slope toward the water, which ere long he heard rippling through the forest. Reaching the bank he threw himself down upon several stones, and in this prostrate position drank eagerly of the sparkling brook. The murmuring sounds around him deadened his ears to any other noise, so he did not hear the soft footsteps of six robust Chilcats as like tigers they glided upon their prey.

Klitonda had satisfied his thirst, and had lifted his head, and was about to regain his feet, when in an instant his enemies were upon him. With a gurgling roar of rage Klitonda recoiled at the attack like some mountain grizzly suddenly startled in its den. With a terrific backward bound he bore the clinging Chilcats with him, and for one brief minute it seemed as if this giant of the forest would free himself from his adversaries. His rage was like that of a madman, and his strength appeared almost superhuman. He tossed the Chilcats about like so many playthings, and could he have laid his hand upon his axe, firmly secured in his belt, he would soon have made an end of the whole six opponents. But his arms, legs, and body were so enmeshed by merciless arms that he found it impossible to shake himself free. He staggered to his feet, but could not stand in an upright position for any length of time, and ere long he was forced to the ground, with five Chilcats seated upon his body, while the sixth securely bound his feet, and fastened his hands behind his back with strong moose-hide thongs.

When Klitonda realised that all further resistance would be in vain, he remained very quiet, and watched his captors with an air of apparent indifference. When it was possible to fight he did so with all the strength at his command. But when once overcome, and helpless, he could show his enemies how an Ayana chief could bear defeat.

The Chilcats having firmly bound their captive drew aside, and conversed together in low tones. What they said Klitonda could not tell, but presently they returned, unbound his feet, and commanded him to rise. This he did without an instant's hesitation and stood before them awaiting their further orders. Not a shadow of uneasiness marked his face, as drawn to his full height, he confronted the Chilcats. His eyes alone betrayed the tumultuous emotions which were stirring within his breast. They glowed like two living coals of fire, and well it was for the Coast braves that the chief's hands were tied. In fact so powerful did he seem standing there that the Chilcats placed another thong about his wrists for greater security. They could not well afford to lose so valuable a prisoner who had luckily fallen into their hands. Then for the first time a sarcastic smile played about Klitonda's mouth.

"The Chilcats are cowards," he said. "They are six to one. They sneak up like dogs. They are afraid to fight. They know the strength of the chief of the Ayana, and fear him when bound. They tremble as they look upon him. Their hearts are the same as jack-rabbits. Bah!"

"Let Klitonda talk," replied one. "The Chilcats care not what he says. He will do more than talk when he is taken before the chief's son. He will not sneer then. He calls the Chilcats dogs, but remember dogs can bite. But, come, it's time to be on the way, for a long trail lies ahead."

Klitonda's bow, hunting-axe, and sharp knife were taken from him. He was not surprised at this, for it was only natural that they should disarm such a noted antagonist. Only about the token arrows did he feel anxious. He had dropped them by his side as he stooped to drink, and in the struggle and excitement which ensued the Chilcats had not noticed them. If they remained there the Ayana Indians might find them, and come to his assistance. There was only a very slight possibility of their being found by the right persons. It was his only hope, however, and he felt somewhat relieved when at last they left the place and the arrows remained undisturbed where they had been dropped.

The Chilcats took special care that their prisoner should not escape. They were armed with guns, which had been supplied by the white traders along the coast. They were proud of these weapons, and by means of them they believed they were almost more than a match for the Interior Indians. In all their unscrupulous barter with the Ayana they would never trade a musket for any price no matter how tempting. It was their policy to confine the defeated people strictly to their primitive weapons, as less formidable in case of an uprising.

Klitonda walked in advance, and even if his hands had been free he would have had no chance whatsoever of evading the watchfulness of his captors. The Chilcats wished to take their prisoner back to camp alive. But rather than lose him they would not have hesitated to shoot him down. And this Klitonda well knew. The Chilcats had a number of old scores to settle with him, and shooting would be too easy a death. They had other choice punishments in reserve for this Ayana chieftain. Klitonda made no effort to escape. He walked more like a conqueror than a bound prisoner. Proudly he carried his head like some monarch of the forest. They might curb his body, but not his defiant spirit. He strode along at such a rapid pace that his captors found it difficult at times to keep up with him. He did not seem to mind the heat nor the flies now, for he had other things of a more serious nature to trouble him. He was thinking of the wreck of all his plans, and what would become of the white men, and his own people. That the former could hold out for any length of time against the overwhelming numbers of Chilcats he could scarcely believe. Their Post would be destroyed, and they themselves most likely killed. And what would become of Owindia? Who would protect her? There was little wonder that at such thoughts Klitonda should fiercely strain at the gripping thongs. Oh, to be free once more! With hands unloosed he would face the whole Chilcat horde. He did not fear death, if he could meet it in the midst of his enemies, with hunting axe in hand. But to be bound like a cur, and to endure all the insults which would be heaped upon him, with an ignominious death in the end, were like gall and wormwood to the proud chief.

Thus all through that hot afternoon they sped on their way. The sun sank low in the west, and at length disappeared behind the trees. The air became cooler, and the innumerable flies ceased their pitiless torture. The trailing light of day hung lingeringly over the land until night at length rose slowly up from forest and valley, and folded her in its diaphanous mantle. The narrow trail became lost in the deepening gloom, and the wayfarers were forced to depend upon the sense of touch rather than sight to guide them forward. Their progress became slower, and the Chilcats crowded closer to their prisoner, fearful lest they should lose him in the darkness. No stars were visible, for thick clouds had drifted in from the coast, and a plaintive wind began to moan among the trees. But steadily they pressed onward, until at length a light pierced the murky gloom straight ahead. Then the Chilcats paused, while one of them lifted up his voice, and gave a succession of short shrill calls. Soon an answer came speeding back, so without further hesitation they hurried onward out of the night toward the cheerful fire.

To Klitonda the place seemed alive with Indians crowding around the genial blaze, for the night was now chilly. They were evidently preparing to leave, for their guns were lying near, while their hunting axes and sharp knives were in their places. They were a hardy, formidable band of warriors which met Klitonda's gaze. One glance was sufficient for him to interpret the purpose of their preparations. The Post was the object of their attack, and the dark night would stand them in good stead. For themselves they had no fear. The Ayana Indians they held in such contempt, that they did not think them worthy of consideration. Instead of prowling about the Chilcat camp they believed that they were hurrying off to their mountain fastnesses. As for the white men they were not so sure. They, accordingly, had several braves lying in ambush watching the Post, who would hurry back with the news should the white traders sally forth for a night attack. The Chilcats, therefore, felt no immediate danger, and were laughing and chatting about the fire as Klitonda drew near.

At once considerable excitement ensued at the presence of the outcast chief. Forgotten for a time was the contemplated raid upon the Post, and all turned their attention to the prisoner standing in their midst.

Klitonda uttered not a word, but gazed calmly upon his enemies. He noted their leader, the chief's son, and a slight curl of contempt flickered about the corners of his mouth as he watched him. He was smaller than the ordinary Chilcat, fat, and possessed of a weak, sensual face. Stupidity and arrogance were plainly stamped upon his features. So this was the creature who made war upon the Ayana, and demanded Owindia for his wife. Better, so Klitonda thought, that his daughter should be dead than to live with such a brute. He was surprised, too, at the deference paid to him by his men, and how implicitly those around the fire obeyed his slightest word. This leader was evidently fond of pow-wows, when he could give vent to his oratorical powers.

"Bamba is pleased to see Klitonda, chief of the Ayana," he began, turning to the captive. "But where is his daughter? Why is she not here too?"

"Dog of a Chilcat," was the low growl-like response. "Why speak such soft words? Klitonda knows their worth. Owindia will never be the wife of such a cur as Bamba. The Chilcats are squaws. They are afraid of Klitonda. He stands here in their midst. Unfasten these thongs. With all his warriors about him, does he fear one Ayana brave?"

"Why does Klitonda say such things?" was the sharp reply. "Does he not know that he is in the hands of the Chilcats? Does not his heart tell him that soft words will come better from his lips?"

"Bah! Klitonda is not a jack-rabbit. He has said that the Chilcats are squaws, but no he was wrong, they are papooses."

During this conversation Klitonda was standing close to the fire, while the Coast Indians were gathered near, surrounding their leader. As the word of contempt fell from the captive's lips, Bamba turned and pointed to a tree standing in the shadows several rods away.

"Take the Ayana chief, and fasten him there," he commanded. "Bamba would talk to the Chilcat warriors. Make the dog safe, neck, body, and feet. Quick."

Klitonda was immediately seized, and hurried across the open. With his back placed against the tree he was bound as Bamba had directed. And there he was left alone facing his captors, who were now gathered about the fire in eager consultation. Klitonda knew that escape from such a situation was impossible. The thong about his neck was alone sufficient to bind him, apart from the others around his body and ankles. It drew his head back against the tree in a cramped position, forcing him to look upwards, and only with extreme difficulty could he observe the warriors sitting near the fire. The wind swayed the trees, and the cold air drifted into his face. But though his body was bound, his indomitable spirit was free. Thongs, and the power of the Chilcats could not curb that. He knew what to expect from his merciless enemies. What the outcome of their consultation would be he had not the slightest doubt. But no matter what they might do he would be Klitonda, the Ayana chief, to the bitter end.

CHAPTER XV

THE SPIRIT OF KLOTA

WHEN Owindia left her father's lodge and entered the forest a great dread came upon her. Once she stayed her steps as if uncertain what to do. The wild beating of her own heart was the only sound she heard. She was tempted to turn back and give up the undertaking. But the thought of the promise she had made and what the Chilcats might do if she did not appear nerved her heart and gave her courage to go forward. Down among the trees she moved, then across an open valley, where stretched a long meadow of wild grass. On the farther side was the large rock, which she had mentioned as the place of meeting. Her steps lagged as she approached the spot, and a sigh of relief escaped her lips when she found that no one was there. Taking up her position by the rock, she leaned against it, and looked down the valley. The soughing of the wind was the only sound which fell upon her ears. How lonely it was, and the darkness was fast deepening. Her eyes wandered away among the dim arches of the forest and she fancied she could see dozens of Chilcats hiding among the trees and peering forth upon her. The suspense now became terrible.

She could have endured almost anything except this time of waiting.

Just when her patience was about exhausted two shadowy forms glided from somewhere she could not tell, and stood before her. So suddenly did they appear that she started, and with difficulty suppressed a cry of fright.

"Come," was the brief command. "The Chilcat braves will take the Ayana maiden to the chief's son."

There was nothing for Owindia to do but to follow. Her guides led her along the edge of the wild meadow, keeping close within the shadow of the forest. She wondered somewhat as to the wariness of their movements, but asked no questions. The braves walked fast, and the maiden found it hard at times to keep up with them.

The lower part of the meadow terminated at the foot of a steep hill, covered with jack-pines, firs, and dead trees. Up the side they moved, the way becoming more difficult, owing to the underbrush, fallen logs, and the fast-gathering darkness. Having reached the summit they paused a moment to rest. Then descending the opposite side, they ere long came to a ridge of jagged rocks. From the midst of the latter a light pierced the gloom. It was a camp fire, around which several forms were gathered. It did not take them long to reach the spot, and Owindia was glad enough to warm her numb hands before the pleasant blaze. Next she looked around for the chief's son, expecting to recognise his person by the respect which would be paid to him by the others. She saw, however, only a dozen braves, who all seemed of equal importance. The men noticed her questioning look, and interpreting its meaning hastened to explain. The chief's son was beyond the hills with most of the Indians, so they told her, and would arrive at almost any time. They were to keep her until he returned.

Owindia said nothing, but she intuitively felt that they were not telling her the truth. Why were there so few of them hiding on this hillside among the rocks? It was a most unlikely spot for a large band of Indians to encamp. Then she noticed that the two braves who had guided her to the place did not remain long, but took their departure after a few moments' conversation with the rest. She racked her brain in an effort to solve the problem. Little attention was paid to her by the Indians sitting around the fire. Even when she rose to her feet and moved about they appeared not to notice her. She had come of her own free will, and had evidently believed the story they told her about the chief's son. It was therefore unnecessary to keep a strict watch upon her.

Owindia thought much of Natsatt, and wondered if he would ever know what she had done for his sake, and for her own people. What would he think and do when he could not find her at the lodge? He would go there, she was sure of that, and how surprised he would be when she was nowhere to be found. Perhaps he was there now, calling her by name. She listened intently as if expecting to hear his voice. Her heart throbbed with a longing which no resolve could quench. It was sweet even in her misery to feel that his love for her was strong and deep. No matter what her life might be in the future the memory of that time since she had first met her lover would ever remain like a light shining in the darkness.

Thinking thus she glanced toward the braves seated about the camp fire. The chief's son had not yet arrived. What was keeping him? she wondered. Was he not expecting her? Did not the messenger tell him that she was coming; that Owindia, daughter of the Ayana chief, was willing to give herself up to save those she loved? How soon would it be after she met him ere he would lead her and his band back over the mountains to the coast? Would all the warriors be willing to go? she mused. They had come a long way, and to return without driving back the white traders, and punishing the Interior Indians, simply for the sake of an Ayana squaw would be galling to their haughty natures. Some, at least, would rebel she felt certain.

A sudden thought flashed into her mind, causing her to cease her restless pacing, and to remain perfectly rigid, while her eyes stared out wildly into the blackness beyond. It was like the voice of some one standing near. "There is trouble," it seemed to say. "Those Chilcats around the fire are opposed to the action of the chief's son. They have spirited Owindia away, intending to keep her hidden for a time. They have heard what the messenger said. The chief's son is encamped near the Post, and if Owindia does not go to him to-night he will believe that she has changed her mind. He will, accordingly, fall at once upon the white traders, and attack the Ayana people."

Owindia's course now became clear. She must get away as quickly as possible, and hurry to the chief's son. Suppose she should be too late! She had not the slightest doubt about this new idea which had come to her mind. She only wondered that she had not thought about it sooner. She looked toward the fire. The men were sitting as before, talking and paying no heed to the maiden in their midst. They knew nothing of the agitation which was stirring her breast, but imagined that she was waiting impatiently for the arrival of the chief's son.

Owindia continued to move to and fro, but kept steadily edging away from the fire. Farther and farther each time she advanced, until at last with one furtive glance behind her she plunged into the thicket, and hastened up the hill among the tossed and tangled rocks. Her heart beat fast, and occasionally she paused to listen. Hearing nothing she continued on her way. Reaching the top of the hill she dropped behind a thick bush to rest. The Chilcats evidently had not missed her, so she hurried forward down the opposite side of the hill straight toward the meadow which she had so recently left. She did not mind the darkness, and never once did she stumble as she worked her way through the forest without any trail to guide her. Her feet were light even though her heart was heavy. Her one desire now urged her onward. She must reach the chief's son before he began the attack. By going back to the large rock she would be able to direct her course. At length the place was reached and once again she stopped to listen. No sound could she hear excepting the wind in the tree tops. There was no sign of any battle taking place at the Post, and nothing to tell her that the Chilcats were advancing.

Leaving the rock she started forward in the direction she believed the Coast Indians had their camp. It was only a supposition on her part. Nevertheless she must search until she should find them. She was not so certain of her course now, and walked more cautiously. The trees became larger the farther she went and there was less underbrush to impede her progress. Had it been daytime she could have seen some distance ahead. Often she stopped and listened, hoping to hear something to direct her steps. At length she came to a sudden standstill for there right before her the light of a fire fell upon her eyes. Slowly she advanced, and ere long she was able to see many forms gathered around the place. It was a big blaze, and fiery cinders were whirling up into the night, making strange fantastic figures in their flight. The Chilcats had not made the attack. There was some comfort in the thought. But with one fear removed the old one returned. How was she to face that band of Indians? How would they treat her? What would they do to her? How helpless she felt, there in the wilderness, with her enemies so near. How she longed for the strong presence of her father. And her mother, did she know of what her only child was doing? Was her spirit near her this night? she wondered. She believed somewhat that the spirits of the departed were on earth. She had heard it so often on the lips of old Indians that it would have been remarkable if she had not been impressed with the belief.

"Mother, mother," she breathed. "Be with Owindia to-night. Let your spirit strengthen your child in her trouble."

Silently and slowly she approached the Chilcats. She did not hurry as she wished to observe them for a while before they saw her. There was no watch kept so no one opposed her progress or gave warning of her presence. Several large trees were right in front, a few rods from the squatting natives. Behind one of these she glided, and thus obtained a good view of all that was taking place. She beheld one, whom she decided was the chief's son, surrounded by his warriors. His appearance did not appeal to her, and a shiver shook her form as she thought how soon she would be his wife, and therefore his abject slave. The longer she watched the less courage she had. How could she step forth and face those men. What were they talking about in such an animated manner? she wondered, and why were they delaying the attack upon the Post? She could not understand what they were saying, but once she thought she heard the name of Klitonda mentioned. They were evidently talking about her father, and what were they saying? How she longed to leave and flee away from the place back to the Post. She turned her head and looked into the dark forest. How like a friend it seemed to her. It would shelter her from those human wolves, for it had always been her friend, and she loved it. She turned her head slowly and regretfully to look again upon the Chilcats, when an object on her left arrested her attention. It was the form of a man with his back against a large tree, and from his unnatural position she was certain that he was fast bound. The light was dim and uncertain so she was unable to distinguish his face. But something about the figure seemed familiar, especially his large size. Whoever he was he must be a prisoner, she thought, captured by the Chilcats. No doubt they were now discussing his fate as they squatted before the fire. A feeling of pity stole into her heart for this unfortunate captive. Perhaps he was one of the Ayana Indians. Suppose he were her own father! The idea came with a startling intensity. He might have been captured by the enemy and brought into camp. With Owindia to think was to act, so slipping from her concealed position she hurried across the open, fearful lest the Chilcats should observe her. She did not go straight to the tree, but with native instinct made a somewhat circular movement back into the forest and thus reached the tree behind the bound man. The latter could not see her, and if he heard her light step he paid no heed. Carefully Owindia peered around the large bole, and one quick glance was sufficient to tell her that the captive was in very truth her father.

Instinctively her hand slipped to the knife safely concealed within her jacket. She would cut the thongs which bound him fast, and set him free. She was about to stretch out her arm, when she hesitated and lowered the knife. Her father must not know that she was there. He must think it was some one else. Nothing would induce him to leave the place knowing that his own child would be left in the midst of the hated Coast wolves. A thought flashed into her mind, so placing her face close to the tree she whispered so her father was sure to hear:

"The spirit of Klota is near Klitonda. She will cut the thongs and save him from the Chilcats. Do not delay an instant but hurry back into the forest."

This done, with three swift deft strokes she severed the bonds which held him, and the captive was free.

When Klitonda heard the voice, and felt the thongs give way, he had no doubt but that it was Klota's spirit which had come to him in his time of need. Without a moment's hesitation he obeyed the command,

and with the agility of a wild-cat leaped to one side and was instantly lost to view amidst the darkness of the forest depths.

No sooner had her father disappeared than Owindia took his place and stood with her back against the tree. All had happened so quickly that if the Chilcats had glanced in that direction they could have hardly detected the brief space of time when no one was standing there. When they did look they beheld what they believed to be the form of the Ayana chief securely bound as they had left him. That he should escape did not even enter their minds. They, therefore, paid little attention to him so engrossed were they with their conversation concerning what they should do with their important captive.

Owindia now determined to wait until the Chilcats should find her, and every moment would give her father time to place a long distance between him and his enemies. The coolness of the night pierced her body, and caused her to shiver and wish for the warmth of the fire. How long would the Indians remain talking? she wondered, and what would they say and do to her when they discovered what she had done? The time dragged slowly by, and her body became very weary. She had endured so much mental strain during the day and evening that she longed to lie down and rest forever. At length, however, a movement took place among the Chilcats. She saw them rise to their feet and advance to where she was standing. It did not take them many seconds to ascertain that something was wrong. They then rushed toward her, caught her by the arms and hurried her over to the fire. A wild babel of voices at once ensued as the truth dawned upon the warriors' minds. They knew they had been outwitted, and by a squaw at that! How could they ever endure such humiliation? They would be the laughing-stock of all the tribes along the coast for years to come. They found the cut thongs lying by the tree, and they needed no words from the maiden to explain who had done the deed.

Owindia stood close to the fire, to every appearance the calmest of them all. With hands clasped before her, and bent head she seemed the very embodiment of an abject slave, willing to obey the slightest command of the most menial of the whole Chilcat tribe. But such an attitude was most deceptive, and not one of the warriors realised the magnificent courage of her heart or the subtle keenness of her active brain. She saw and understood more than they imagined. When at last the confusion had subsided she was rudely pushed before the chief's son, who was standing somewhat apart from the others. He had been watching her most intently, and was mentally comparing her with women of his own tribe. He had heard that she was beautiful, but never until he now set his eyes upon her did he fully comprehend that the half had never been told him. Her flushed face, and the strange light which shone in her eyes added to her loveliness. With savage impetuosity he longed to possess this wonderful creature. What were the spoils of war, the punishing of the white traders when passion was in the balance? He had never been taught the virtue of self-restraint. Even from a child his every wish had been gratified by indulgent relatives. When he grew to manhood none thought of crossing the will of one who in course of time would be chief of the tribe. In war and conquest he delighted, especially with a defeated people who had not the spirit to oppose his exorbitant demands. He was all for self, and friend or foe he would lightly sacrifice in order to accomplish any desire upon which he had set his heart. Arrogant, voluptuous, and conceited through smooth-tongued flattery he knew little or nothing of opposition. That this maiden, even though a chief's daughter, should refuse his slightest behest never once entered his dull mind. Women of his own tribe had ever sought his favour, and his smile or word of approval had been to them like the nectar of the gods. What, therefore, should he expect from a squaw of a conquered people?

"Bamba is pleased to see the daughter of the Ayana chief," he began. "But what has she done? She has set Klitonda free, and does she not fear the anger of the Chilcats?"

"Owindia is not afraid," was the quiet reply. "She is willing to die, if necessary, for the sake of her father, and her own people."

"And has the chief's daughter come to Bamba's camp to be his wife?" the chief's son asked.

"Ah, ah; if he will lead his warriors back beyond the mountains to the coast, and interfere no more with the white traders and the Ayana Indians. If he will do that Owindia will be his wife."

Bamba hesitated before replying, and a deep silence reigned among the Chilcats. Much depended upon his answer. The rebel Indians had returned and were now standing among their companions. When they had missed their captive they had hurried back to the main camp just as Owindia was discovered standing by the tree in her father's place. They were not alone in their desire to attack the whites, but were the only ones who had courage enough to attempt to thwart their leader's design.

"Is it the wish of the Chilcat warriors," Bamba asked, turning to his men, "to return to the coast if the daughter of the Ayana chief will go with them?"

"No, no," came the emphatic response, followed by a confusion of numerous voices. "The Chilcat warriors will not return. Why should the chief's son ask them to do such a thing? They will be laughed at when they go back, and the whole tribe will say that an Ayana squaw turned their heads."

Bamba was astonished at such words, and a hot anger filled his heart. What did his men mean by such action? Never before had they opposed his will, and why should they do it now? He turned angrily upon them.

"Your leader, the chief's son, orders you to go back," he cried. "Refuse if you dare."

"The warriors do refuse," came the answer from several lips. "Let Bamba beware or else his warriors will leave him. They are not papooses. They will fight without him. Let him take the Ayana squaw, and go back to the coast, the rest will stay and fight the white traders."

Bamba was in a rage, and poured forth a torrent of words at his men. But they had no effect upon the determined Chilcats, who merely listened to him with sullen faces. Seeing that he was making no impression but only embittering his warriors against him, Bamba turned toward Owindia who all the time had been standing quietly before him.

"Bamba will answer the Ayana squaw's question in the morning," he said. "He cannot tell her now. But she must stay, for Bamba wants her. She has won his heart. Never has he seen such a beautiful maiden. He will make her his wife at once."

"Owindia will not wait," was the decided reply. "She wants her answer now, and if the chief's son will not give it to her she will go away at once. Bamba is but a child. He cannot rule his warriors."

With this Owindia turned and started to leave the place. But Bamba rushed forward, and caught her by the arm.

"Stay," he demanded. "The Ayana maiden will never leave until she becomes the chief's son's wife. She shall stay."

Owindia with a quick movement threw off his hand and stepped back a pace or two. The fire of determination shone in her eyes which bespoke danger. Her right hand slipped within the bosom of her dress, and brought forth the sharp pointed knife.

"Keep back," she cried. "Lay another hand upon me and you will feel this. Bamba has deceived Owindia. He promised by his messenger to leave the country and go back beyond the mountains if Klitonda's daughter would become his wife. He cannot do it, for his warriors will not let him. Owindia has done her part, and Bamba must not stop her. If the Chilcats force her to stay she will bury this knife into her own breast before she becomes the wife of Bamba the coward."

Bamba was now furious with rage. He would have seized the maiden, and made her his own by main force. But he feared that deadly knife, and the flashing eyes of the one who held it. At this critical moment the warriors came to his assistance.

"Let not the Ayana squaw fear," the spokesman said. "She must stay here to-night, and then to-morrow she can go back to her own people. Let her not try to escape, for it will be impossible. She will be safe here. No one will harm her, for the Chilcat warriors will protect her with their lives. Klitonda's daughter has a brave heart."

Slowly Owindia's tense arm dropped by her side. Then she replaced the knife within her bosom, and a sigh escaped her lips.

"It is well," she replied. "Owindia will stay to-night. She will trust the Chilcat warriors, but not their leader, the chief's son."

CHAPTER XVI

THE VOICE OF THE DECEIVER

WHEN Natsatt left Owindia, the day they had parted from each other, his heart was full of blissful joy. He recalled every word the maiden had said, as well as her tokens of affection. He entered the Post like one in a dream. How good life was to him, he believed. What joy there was in living when he had so much to live for. He hardly thought of the presence of the Chilcats, as deep passionate love had driven everything else from his mind.

He was rudely brought back to earth when once inside the Post. There he found much activity going on. The men were strengthening the fortification, looking after the guns and ammunition, while several were carrying supplies of water from the river. Some cast surly looks upon Natsatt as he entered, which affected him not in the least. It was only when he met Ranger Dan was his composure shaken, and his dream-castle knocked to pieces.

"Where in the devil have you been for such a length of time?" the Ranger demanded. "The rest of the men have been hard at work, while you have been loafing. Over to see the squaw, I suppose. I brought you into this country to work, and not to mope around like a love-sick fool."

Natsatt's face flushed under his leader's words, and he was tempted to reply in the same coin. He checked himself, however, knowing that anger would be of no avail. He wished to keep on the good side of Dan, especially so now as his companions were turning against him.

"Do not judge too harshly, Dan," he replied. "I admit that I have been neglecting the Post this morning, but perhaps I have done something else which is just as important, if not more so."

"In what way, young man? Making more love to the chief's daughter? That no doubt is more important in your eyes, but not in mine, remember."

"Don't be too sure of that, Dan. Suppose I have learned something for which you have been searching for years? Would you not consider that important?"

"Hey? What is that you tell me? Something important? There is only one thing which is of vital importance to me, and it's not likely you have learned anything about that. Would to God you had!"

"But I have, Dan," Natsatt insisted. "The chief's daughter told me, and I intended to speak to you about it before, but the arrival of the Chilcats drove it out of my mind. It's about Klota."

At that name Dan's face underwent a marvellous transformation. The sarcastic expression disappeared, and an eager light shone in his eyes. A tremor shook his body, and reaching forward he laid a strong hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"Speak, speak, quick! and let me know what you have heard," he demanded in a hoarse whisper. "Is she alive? Is she here?"

"No," Natsatt replied. "She is not here; she is—" His voice faltered, and he was unable to finish the sentence. How could he tell this old man the truth? What effect would it have upon him? Perhaps it would break his heart.

Dan noted the hesitation, and truly read the meaning.

"Dead!" he breathed. "You needn't say the word. I know it already."

He stood for a few seconds looking full into Natsatt's face. In his eyes dwelt an expression the young man had never seen there before. It told of the last abandonment of hope, and the end of all earthly desires. He tottered for an instant, and then sinking upon a bench near by, buried his face in his hands.

"Dead!" he murmured. "My beautiful Klota dead! Is it possible! Is it possible! No flower of the forest was as fair as she. No step was as soft as hers. No eyes ever shone with such a light, and no voice of bird was half as sweet as hers. And so she is dead! The babe I held to my breast; the little one who toddled by my side; the child who roamed with me in the woods is dead. Why did I ever live to learn it? Why did I not die thinking that she was still alive? What has been the use of all my wanderings, heart-aches and longings?"

He paused, and sat for some time lost in thought, a pitiable object of despair. Natsatt did not dare to disturb him, and neither did he wish to do so. That bent head, with the hair so white and thin touched him deeply. He longed to go to him, place his arms about him, and tell him how he sympathised with him in his trouble. But he shrank back at the idea, feeling sure that the sorrowing Ranger would resent such an act. At length Dan lifted his head and looked into Natsatt's face.

"Did the girl tell you how Klota died?" he asked. "Did she give any details?"

"Yes. She said the Chilcats did it."

At this the old man leaped to his feet. His weakness had disappeared. His appearance at this moment caused the young man to step back a pace.

"The Chilcats, you say?" he demanded. "The Chilcats killed my Klota?"

"That is what Owindia said."

"And how did she know? Did any one see them do it? Tell me, quick."

"She saw the deed herself. She was there when it was done."

"God in heaven!" burst from the Ranger's lips. "It must be true. And those brutes killed my only child, my darling Klota, and I was not there to save her! But surely others must have been there besides the girl. How did she escape?"

"Her father arrived, and meted out a speedy revenge to one of the Chilcats, and the other got away. There were only two of them."

"Her father, you say? and who was he?"

"Klitonda, the chief of the Ayána. Klota was his wife, and Owindia is his only child."

At these words Dan stared at Natsatt as if he had not heard aright. The young man seeing his perplexity hastened to explain.

"Do you not understand?" he asked. "Owindia is none other than Klota's daughter. Of her you need not be ashamed, for she is the most beautiful maiden I ever saw."

"Owindia is her name, so you say. And she is beautiful, too. But what beauty can ever equal my darling Klota. But see, laddie, I must look upon her. She is Klota's child, and therefore my child. She must come here at once, and stay at the Post. The Chilcats are prowling around, and we cannot tell what might happen to her. I have lost one, but it is something to find another who might be a true daughter to me in my old age. She must not stay here in the wilderness. I shall take her out to civilisation, and whatever money can do for her it shall be done. That will be something to live for. Will she refuse to go, do you think? Will she care to leave her father?"

"I feel quite sure that she will go," Natsatt replied.

"That is, she told me she would go anywhere with me."

"Will go with you," repeated the Ranger. "Then she loves you, and has given you her heart. She will not care for an old man. Education will mean nothing to her, and why should it? Why should one born in this land care for the ways and benefits of civilisation?"

"But she does care, Dan. She has often told me how she longed for other things, and is never tired of hearing about the great world beyond the mountains of the rising sun, as she calls it. She learned much from her mother, and is anxious to know more."

"True, quite true, lad. She would not be Klota's child if she did not wish to learn. My mind was so set upon making money that I neglected to give Klota the education she should have had. I was punished for it. Perhaps now I can make amends with her child. Yes, she must come to the Post. And, let me see, she must have a room all by herself. Where can she stay? Ah, I have it. We will fix up the store. A bed in the farther corner, a table near by, and we will straighten things up a bit. Klota's child shall have the best we have to give, and that will be none too good. Help me, lad, to make the room as cosy as we can, and then you must bring her here!"

Dan was quite enthusiastic now, and the old expression of hopelessness had left his face. He had something to live for. Forgotten for a while were the Chilcats as he and Natsatt set to work to make the store as comfortable as possible. It took them some time to arrange things to Dan's complete satisfaction, and then he stood back, and viewed the room.

"It isn't much after all," he remarked. "If we only had a few pictures to hang on the walls, so they wouldn't look so bare; a looking glass, a few chairs, and some rugs for the floor. But it's all we've got. I guess we'll have to wait until we get outside where we can buy such things."

"Suppose we never go outside?" Natsatt questioned. "Suppose the Chilcats will not let us?"

"Don't you worry about that, lad," was the reply. "What do I care for a pack of measly Indians? Haven't I lived among them all my life? They'll never attack us; they're too cowardly for that. When they see our defence, and some of their men get knocked over, they'll soon beat a retreat. We're snug in here, and can stand a long siege."

"Do not misjudge the Chilcats, Dan," Natsatt answered. "If what I have heard is correct we shan't be rid of them in a hurry. They are great warriors, and are determined to drive us out. They have never been defeated, and are most blood-thirsty and cruel. Klitonda knows all about them, and he has told me many things."

"What you say, lad, may be true, but remember, they have never yet run up against white men with Ranger Dan in charge. I have an old score to pay back now, have I not? Did they not murder Klota?

I am just longing to get at them. My blood tingles, and my fingers twitch. I am an old man, but there is the spirit of youth in my veins still. I was somewhat of a fighter in my younger days, and I guess I can fight some yet, especially against the Chilcat murderers. But, there, that will do. We have talked too long already, and it's getting late. You had better hurry off for the maid. I am anxious to see her. In the meantime I shall find out what the men are doing outside. They are inclined to loaf of late, and are quite surly at times. There seems to be something brewing, which I can't altogether fathom. But if they try any of their ugly tricks with me it won't be well with them,I can tell you that."

Natsatt knew full well that there was something wrong with the men, and he was fully aware of the cause. But he did not wish to be a tale-bearer. He, therefore, left the store and made his way over to the chief's abode, while Dan went out to see what the men were doing.

Natsatt was not long in reaching the lodge where he expected to find Owindia. He noted that most of the Indians had left the place, and that those who remained were carrying their few belongings to their canoes preparatory for a speedy departure.

At the chief's lodge no one was to be seen. The robes remained inside, while several kettles were found outside. He called Owindia by name, but received no reply. What had become of her? he wondered. Perhaps she had gone back to the shore where he had found her that day. He started for the river, and had gone but a short distance when he came to the lean-to of Nagu, the medicine man. He did not wish to speak to the creature, and was about to pass when the conjurer suddenly arose from his squatting position and stood before him. Upon his face was an expression of diabolical hatred, and his hands and arms moved to and fro in an excited manner.

"What's the matter?" Natsatt demanded in the native tongue. "Is anything wrong? What do you want? I have nothing to give you."

"Nagu, the great medicine man, wants nothing," was the savage reply. "He would not take anything from the half-breed dog. Why does he come here? Why do the white men come into this country? They will never go out again. The Chilcats will fall upon them, and there will not be one left. Does the half-breed think that he will take away the chief's daughter beyond the great mountains?"

"Yes, the half-breed thinks he will," Natsatt replied. "All the Chilcats on the coast cannot stop him. He is not afraid of them."

"The half-breed's words are big," Nagu rejoined. "But he does not know the Chilcats, and he does not know the chief's daughter. He thinks he does, but he is mistaken."

"What do you mean? I don't understand you," and Natsatt looked keenly into the creature's cunning eyes as he spoke.

"Does the half-breed want to know? Will he like to hear what Nagu can tell him?"

"Yes. What can you say that will trouble me?"

"Nagu can tell much, for he has seen and heard. He saw the Chilcat messenger in Klitonda's lodge. He listened to what was said, and he saw the chief's daughter go away. What does the half-breed think of that?"

"You saw the Chilcat messenger in the chief's lodge, and watched Owindia go away with him," Natsatt repeated in a puzzled manner. "Your words are strange. Do you know what you are saying?"

"Ah, ah, Nagu knows. The Chilcat chief's son sent for Klitonda's daughter. He wants her for his wife."

A great fear now leaped into Natsatt's heart. He felt that he had not heard aright. And yet there could be no mistake. The medicine man had spoken, and what reason had he for doubting his words. All his calmness had left him, and a nameless something overwhelmed him. Owindia gone away to be the wife of a Chilcat! It could not be. He would not believe such a thing about Owindia. It angered him to think that any one would say such a thing about her. He remembered her words that afternoon, and her clinging affection.

"You villain!" he cried. "You lie! Why do you tell such a story to me? Do you think I will believe you. Owindia is not such a creature as you are to turn away from the one she loves."

The medicine's man's eyes grew smaller until they became like two narrow slits. His hands and arms ceased their wild movements.

"The half-breed thinks that Nagu lies, does he? Let him think so, then. But he will find out in time, and he will remember that he was told the truth."

"But why should Owindia go to the Chilcats?" Natsatt queried. "Are they not her enemies? Why should she leave her father, and her own people?"

"Nagu has spoken," was the reply. "He has told the half-breed what he has seen and heard. If he does not believe him let him go to the Chilcat dogs and learn for himself."

Natsatt looked for a short time upon the medicine man, and then without another word left him, and went back to Klitonda's lodge. He wished to be alone to think over what he had just heard. Perhaps it was all a base lie. He knew much about the wiles of these northern conjurers. They would stoop to any depth in order to further their evil designs. But what purpose could Nagu have now? Why should he concoct such a story about Owindia? What object could he have in view? But try as he might he could not banish the horrible thought from his mind, that there was much truth in the story. And where was Klitonda? What had become of him? Surely he would not let his daughter go to the Chilcats. He would rather see her dead than that such a thing should happen. Thus the more he racked his brain for a solution of the problem the more mysterious it became.

He stayed for a while at the lodge, hoping that Owindia would appear. But when she did not come he at length made his way slowly back to the Post. He dreaded to tell Dan what he had learned. What would the old man say, and how would he feel? He found him with the men in the large room adjoining the store. The Ranger looked expectantly up as Natsatt entered, but said nothing when he saw that he was alone. He noted the disappointed expression upon his face, and realised at once that something was wrong. He waited, however, until supper was ended, and then drawing the young man into the store questioned him eagerly about the maiden.

And Natsatt told him the whole story just as he had received it from the medicine man.

"I can't understand it," he said in conclusion. "It is not like Owindia. She would never do such a thing. I cannot believe that she would leave me to go to the Chilcats. She is too true for that. And besides, her father would not let her go."

"It is certainly strange," Dan replied. "The medicine man may have invented this lie for some purpose, you can never trust one of those creatures. But speculation won't do us any good. We must find out where the girl is. If she is with the Chilcats, and has gone of her own free will, I don't see that we can do anything. But if they have stolen her away, and are keeping her as prisoner then by heavens! we've got to do something, and the sooner we make a move the better."

"That's my opinion, too, Dan," Natsatt quietly remarked. "Do you think I could stay here all night knowing that Owindia was out there with those devils against her will? We must know the truth at once."

"And what is your plan, lad?"

"With your permission I shall visit the Chilcat camp to-night, find out if she is there, and learn the strength of the Coast Indians. It is certainly important for us to know."

"You are right, you are right," the Ranger mused. "We should know how many there are who have come against us. But it will be a difficult undertaking. However, it can't be helped. You have my consent to go, but be very careful. I don't want to lose you."

CHAPTER XVII

IN THE FOREST DEPTHS

WHEN Natsatt started upon his perilous task he knew how necessary it would be for him to proceed with the greatest caution. He believed that the Post was being watched by Chilcats who were lying in ambush. He, therefore, slipped quietly out of the door in the barricade, and crept by the side of the wall until he came to the river. Along the bank of this he swiftly moved until he had gained the shelter of the forest some distance above. Here he paused and listened most intently. The night was very dark, and he could observe nothing astir. With the greatest care he skirted the edge of the woods, passed the chief's lodge, and down to the wild meadow below. He knew the region well, as he had hunted all over the place, and had a good idea where the Chilcats were encamped. He found it difficult to move without making any noise, and his progress was accordingly slow. He did not cross the meadow as he knew what sharp eyes Indians had. Instead, he made a long detour around the upper end and came down on the opposite side until he reached the rock where Owindia had waited for the Chilcats. Here he stopped to get his bearings, and then began to thread his way to the left through the dark and silent forest. He little realised that he was following the same course, in fact almost the exact route which Owindia had taken but a short time before.

No sense of fear came into his heart as he moved steadily forward. He was so accustomed to the forest that almost instinctively he directed his steps. How far he was from the camp he could not tell, but he believed it to be somewhere straight ahead. He expected that the Chilcats would have a number of men stationed among the trees to give warning in case any one should approach. It would be necessary to escape these if he should ever get close to the main body of Indians. His progress, therefore, became much slower the farther he advanced. Nothing could he observe for some time, and he began to think that after all he might be astray, when a faint glimmer of a light broke through the night. He stood perfectly still for a while, and then step by step he proceeded. Larger grew the light, which he was soon able to tell came from a camp fire. His action became now more cautious than ever. He glided from tree to tree, pausing for a brief space behind each to make sure that no one was near, and that he had not been observed.

Ere long he was but several rods away, and he was enabled to obtain a good view of the whole camping ground. He was surprised not to see a large band of Indians clustered around the fire. But looking carefully he found that they were there lying upon the ground apparently asleep. Only one person could he see sitting before the burning logs, and his heart gave a great leap when he saw that it was Owindia. She was seated upon a stone, her head bent forward, and her eyes fixed intently upon the burning coals at her feet. Natsatt's blood tingled, and his hand closed hard upon his musket. How he longed to rush forward, seize her in his arms, and bear her away. He felt sure that she was not there of her own accord, but had been carried away captive. He was not afraid to face the whole band if it would do any good. But what could he do against such a number of Chilcats. No doubt some of them were asleep, but a few would be awake. He wondered, too, why no watch was kept upon Owindia. No one seemed to notice her, and how easy it would be for her to slip away into the forest and escape. If she only knew that her lover was not far off watching her, he believed that she would make the attempt. But how could he attract her attention without waking the Indians?

A sudden thought flashed into his mind. It was a risky thing to do, but he was willing to make the attempt. Placing his hand beneath his buck-skin jacket he brought forth his little mouth-organ, and raised it to his lips. Then out upon the night air floated a low sweet tune, which he had often played for Owindia, and one she loved most dearly.

No sooner had the first notes sounded out than a weary head by the fire was raised, and a pair of startled eyes searched the dark forest depths. Owindia recognised that sound, and it brought a new hope into her heart. She had never expected to hear it again, and it brought back memories of happy days. Then a great fear came upon her. The Chilcats would hear it, and her lover would be in great danger. Oh, if he would only stop, and go away. Why should he risk his own life for her sake? What could she do to warn him?"

It was not long before a movement took place among the sleepers, and head after head was raised to listen to the strange sound which had disturbed their slumbers. But the music suddenly ceased. Natsatt saw what was taking place, and lowered the instrument from his lips. In truth he somewhat relished the wonder he had aroused among the natives, and only with an effort could he resist the temptation of giving them a little more excitement. But he knew that further music would bring them to their feet, and that would mean an end to all his hope of getting Owindia away. He, therefore, watched and waited to see if she would make an attempt to come to him when the Indians were again in slumber deep. That they had taken the music for the song of some unfamiliar bird was quite evident from their readiness to resume their disturbed slumbers.

With Owindia, however, it was different. Her heart was beating wildly, and when the music ceased, and she saw the warriors once more asleep she breathed a sigh of relief. How she longed to leave the fire, and go to

Natsatt. But she had given her word that she would remain until the morning, and the Chilcats had promised to take her back. She would keep her promise no matter what the others might do. Lifting her hand she made the motion for Natsatt to go away. She also shook her head as a sign that she could not go with him.

The eager, watchful lover saw the signal, and it puzzled him. What can she mean? he asked himself. It would be very easy for her to come to me now, and why does she not do so? Then the medicine man's story came into his mind. Was there truth in it after all? Had she come to this place of her own free will? But where was the chief's son? He could not see him near her side. Where else would he be if she had become his wife. Perhaps he was waiting to take her back to the coast, that the Indian marriage ceremony might be performed there in the presence of all the tribe. That Owindia did not make any effort to leave the Chilcats and come to him when she knew that he was near, gave him good ground for his suspicion. If such was the case he might as well go back to the Post. There was nothing more for him to do. He could not carry her away by main force, and neither would be attempt it. If she preferred the chief's son to him he would make no further effort to save her. This was one voice which spoke to him. There was another, however, which he could not silence. It told him there must be some reason connected with the affair; that

Owindia loved him still, and would gladly flee to his arms for protection if she could. There was something holding her back. There was a purpose in her strange action. It was this idea which stayed his feet, and kept him at his watch amid the trees. He could not take his eyes away from that form crouching before the fire. Why does she not lie down? he asked himself. She must be very weary. At times she would lift her head and look straight toward the concealed lover. He knew that she could not see him, but it thrilled his heart to know that she was thinking of him.

How long Natsatt remained in that one place he could not tell. He only knew that night was speedily advancing, and that the early northern dawn would ere long be breaking upon the far-off mountain peaks. The fire was still burning, for occasionally Owindia had risen and replenished it from a pile of dry wood lying near. Natsatt believed he could see another reason in this besides that of warmth. She evidently dreaded the darkness among those Indians. She needed the fire for protection as well as for comfort.

At length he determined to quit the place and go back to the Post. The Indians would shortly be stirring and it would not be well for him to be found lurking near. But just as he took one long lingering look upon the maiden, and was about to turn away, he saw a form moving slowly forward from the background. Natsatt stayed his steps, and his hand grasped more firmly the musket. As he saw the figure of an Indian emerge into the fire light and bend over the maiden he quickly brought the weapon to his shoulder. But in a few seconds he lowered it and stood watching the scene before him. The Indian had spoken to Owindia and she had risen to her feet, and was facing the brave. What they said Natsatt could not tell, as he was too far away and their voices were low. When, however, a strong arm reached out and was placed around the maiden he had no doubt as to the object of the man's visit. It must be the chief's son, he thought, endeavouring to draw Owindia aside while the others slept. But the maiden had thrown off the arm which had been placed about her, and stood defiantly before the intruder. Suddenly a knife gleamed in Owindia's hand which she held threateningly before her. At this the brave retreated a step, and then in a twinkling of an eye he reached out, gripped the maiden's wrist, and wrenched the shining steel from her grasp.

What would have followed is hard to say had not Natsatt acted upon the impulse of the moment. He longed to shoot the villain where he stood, and if it came to the worst he would be forced to do so. But another idea had come into his mind. He would try the effect of his mouth organ upon the Chilcat brave. Again bringing it forth he placed it to his lips, and produced a series of such plaintive, doleful sounds that the Indian paused and looked wonderingly into the forest. As the notes continued, growing more uncanny all the time, an expression of superstitious fear overspread his face. The whole band of Chilcats by this time were thoroughly aroused, and had leaped to their feet. Trained from early days to believe in strange apparitions, and weird, ghostly inhabitants of forest, mountain, and glen, it was but natural for them to imagine that now they were surrounded by unseen creatures who belonged to this northern region. Had it been a war-whoop which had aroused them from sleep they would have rushed forward with shouts of defiance. Physical courage they did not lack, but what Chilcat brave could face those horrible invisible beings, who only made their presence known by the doleful sounds they emitted from time to time?

On almost any other occasion Natsatt would have been much amused by the consternation he was causing among the proud and arrogant Chilcats. As it was it brought much satisfaction to his heart to see them standing huddled together like a flock of dazed sheep. Where were the glory of warrior, and the thrill of battle in the presence of that unseen power so full of mystery and awe? Owindia alone seemed unaffected by the sounds which were disturbing the stillness of the night. The chief's son had shrunk away from her, and had flung the knife amid the trees that his men might not see what he had been doing. He, too, stood like the rest and listened apprehensively to the wails which were falling upon their ears. It was only when the sounds ceased that the Chilcats aroused from their temporary fright, and began to talk to one another in an animated manner. They remembered how they had been awakened during the early part of the night, when they had imagined it was a northern bird singing among the trees. Now they believed it was the same creature which had been hovering near through the hours of darkness. Several suggested that the white men had much to do with the noise, and that they were exercising some evil power against the Chilcats.

Natsatt, in the meantime had retreated swiftly and silently away from the place. He knew that he could be of no further assistance to Owindia. He had done her one good turn, and had learned the strength of the enemy. After a while he walked less cautiously, for he felt sure that the Chilcats would not attempt to follow. So engrossed was his mind with what he had seen that he forgot all about the braves whom he believed were watching the Post. In fact he had never been certain that any were there; it was only a supposition on his part.

He did not as before skirt the wild meadow but moved boldly across the open. He had gained the opposite side and had plunged again into the forest, when, without the slightest warning a form leaped upon him out of the night. Recoiling as from an electric shock he felt the brush of cold steel against his face, and knew that he had escaped the deadly blow of a hunting axe as if by a miracle. Then with a bound he grappled with his adversary, caught him about the body, and endeavoured to hurl him to the ground. It was no weakling, however, who had thus so treacherously assailed him, but one whose thews were like whips of steel. That he was a Chilcat Natsatt had not the slightest doubt. A burning rage filled his heart, and nerved him to almost superhuman effort. He realised that it was a struggle to the death, and he must not give his opponent the slightest advantage. He must be wary, and reserve his strength as much as possible. Not a word was spoken as there in the darkness they strained and wrestled with each other. The hard panting of the men told of the desperate struggle which was taking place. Backward and forward they reeled and staggered. A small root or a twig tripping one or the other would soon have ended the conflict. But each kept his feet with marvellous dexterity. Presently Natsatt's right hand was brought in sudden contact with the Indian's face, and with a lightning movement his fingers dropped to the coarse throat, and closed. There was no escaping that grip, which never relaxed for an instant. The native endeavoured to tear away that death-dealing clutch, but in vain. The more he struggled the firmer the fingers seemed to press. His breath came in short fitful gasps. His body weakened, his knees trembled, and soon Natsatt was able to force him to the earth, still holding tenaciously to the throat like a determined bull-dog.

Natsatt did not wish to kill the Indian, and in the darkness he could not tell how much injury the fallen man had received. For a few seconds he maintained his merciless grip, and then let his fingers slowly relax. He sat for a while upon the prostrate form, ready any instant should the Chilcat arouse to renew the contest. But the defeated brave exhibited no sign of further wish to fight. That he was not dead Natsatt could tell by the breathing he could now distinctly hear. He might be unconscious, he thought, and will recover later. He wished to leave the place and get back to the Post. But he desired to have a parting word with his opponent, if he were in a fit condition to understand anything.

"Who are you?" he demanded in the Indian tongue, "and what are you doing here at this time of night?"

Receiving no answer to his question, he continued:

"Speak and tell me who you are, or else I will kill you where you lie."

He had no intention of putting his threat into practice; he only wished to make the man speak. And in truth his words had the desired effect, for after a slight pause there rasped forth the one word "Chilcat."

"Ah, ah, so that's who you are," Natsatt remarked with a sneer. "Nice warrior you are, to lie in wait and leap upon a man without giving him a chance. But you found your mistake this time, didn't you? It was not such an easy job after all, was it? Now look here, Chilcat dog that you are, you've met more than your match to-night. I could kill you here and leave your dead body upon the ground, which is what you really deserve. But I'm not going to do that. I want you to go back to your chief and tell them what the white men are like. That they can fight like grizzlies, and know not what it means to be defeated. Tell him, too, that if he wants to attack the Post he will have a harder job than he expected. There are men over there stronger than I am, and if you had got into their clutches instead of mine they would have had you torn to pieces by this time."

The Chilcat made no reply to these words but lay perfectly still as if he had heard nothing.

"Why don't you speak?" Natsatt demanded. "Why don't you say something? I've a sharp knife here in my belt which is just anxious to do more than tickle your ribs. I'm thinking that would make you speak. Maybe it'll be well to have it handy if you try any of your tricks."

"Ugh!" grunted the Chilcat.

"That makes you say something, does it? Well, I want you to say more than that. Now tell me at once, and no fooling about it either. What is Klitonda's daughter doing over there in the Chilcat camp? How did she get there?"

To these questions the Chilcat deigned no reply until he felt the sharp point of steel pressing his side right over his heart. He then gave a struggle, and attempted to rise.

"None of that," Natsatt ordered. "Try it again and I'll drive this knife into your measly carcass up to the hilt. Tell me, did the chief's daughter go to the Chilcat camp of her own free will?"

"Ah, ah," the native replied.

"And did she go to become the wife of the Chilcat chief's son?"

"Ah, ah."

"What did she do that for? Why did she leave her own people to go there? Did not the Chilcats kill her mother? Has she forgotten that?"

"The Ayana squaw wished to save her people and the white traders."

"In what way?" Natsatt queried, while a faint light of comprehension began to glimmer in his mind.

"The chief's son promised to go back to the coast at once if Klitonda's daughter would be his wife," was the reply.

"Whew! I see," broke from the half-breed's lips. "So that's it, is it? And will the chief's son go away now? Will he leave the white traders and the Ayana people alone?"

"The chief's son will not go away," was the slow response. "His warriors will not let him. They wish to drive out the white traders."

"And what, then, will the Chilcats do with Klitonda's daughter? Will they send her back to her own people?"

To this question came no answer, and from his captive Natsatt could learn nothing more. But he had heard enough to give him cause for much thought. His heart thrilled as he mused upon what Owindia had done. She was willing to sacrifice herself to save those she loved. He felt somewhat friendly to this prostrate Indian for what he had told him. It lifted a great weight from his mind. To know that she whom he loved better than life itself had not been untrue to him, but had taken this step with the noblest motive, brought him much joy. But why did she not come to him when she knew he was waiting for her among the trees? he wondered. It was something he could not understand, although he believed now that Owindia did it for some good reason.

At length Natsatt rose slowly from off the Chilcat's body. He still held the knife in readiness lest the native should renew the attack. Away on the mountain tops the dawn of a new day was breaking. The light stole down silently and gradually among the secret forest ways. It showed quite distinctly the form of the defeated Chilcat lying upon the ground.

"Get up," Natsatt commanded, "and go back to your chief, and tell him what has happened to you this night. Tell him, also, to beware of the white men, for they are swift, merciless, and strong."

The Chilcat waited for no second bidding. He leaped to his feet and without stopping to recover his hunting-axe dashed into the forest, and disappeared from view. Natsatt also turned and with the light of triumph shining upon his face walked swiftly back to the Post.

CHAPTER XVIII

LOYALTY

THERE was no more sleep among the aroused Chilcats after Natsatt left. They spent the remainder of the morning until daylight discussing what they had heard. Various views were given as to the meaning of the strange sounds, but all at length agreed they had something to do with the white men. Owindia remained silent, and listened to the discussion which took place. She watched the Chilcats closely, especially the chief's son, as she felt he could not be trusted. That they had some plan in view for the day was quite certain. They had promised to take her back to the Post, and she anxiously awaited for the time to arrive when they would start. She thought much about Natsatt, and wondered if he was still hiding among the trees. How she longed to be with him in order to tell him everything, and why she had come to the Chilcats. Would he ever know? she questioned with herself, or would he believe that she had been false, and left him because she thought more of the chief's son? She was very tired after her long night's vigil, and the excitement through which she had passed. But there was no opportunity to rest. She did not dare to sleep when the Chilcats were so near. How could she close her eyes when the chief's son was prowling around. She saw him watching her most intently. In fact he seemed to see nothing else.

The Indians had begun to prepare their morning meal when the defeated brave glided into their midst. He was almost exhausted, frightened, and his whole appearance betrayed the desperate ordeal through which he had recently passed. He sank upon the ground before the fire, and for a while refused to say a word. The Indians looked at him and then at one another in astonishment. They associated his pitiable condition with the weird sounds of the night. Had the terrible creature attacked him? What else could it be which could so affect the strongest and most daring warrior of the whole band?

At length his tongue became loosened and he told in a few words his encounter with the half-breed, and his own narrow escape. It cost him much to tell the story of his defeat, and it was easy for his companions to notice the sullen anger which burned in his heart, which expressed itself not only in his eyes but also in the short sharp words he jerked forth.

The whole band of Chilcats was by this time thoroughly aroused. They understood now how they had been deceived during the night. They had been watched by one from the Post, who no doubt had made the startling sounds. It stirred them to a spirit of revenge. How the white traders would laugh at them, and call them papooses. But they would show them by action that they were not cowards. This was the feeling of all the warriors and they gave vent to their wrath in no uncertain language. One Chilcat had been defeated, but the whites would have no cause for sport when the whole band swept upon them. They, therefore, set at once to work forming plans for the intended attack. Some of them drew aside, and spoke in a low voice.

What these latter said Owindia could not tell. She believed, nevertheless, that their conversation had something to do with her, as occasionally they turned their heads in her direction. She had been much interested in listening to the report the defeated brave had brought into camp. She knew without a doubt that the man who had overcome him must be none other than Natsatt. Her heart thrilled at the thought. How she should like to see him to tell him how proud she was of him. Some men would not have spared an Indian who had made such a cowardly attack upon him. It showed to her Natsatt's character in a new light. He was brave, strong, and merciful. Little wonder then that he should seem to a maiden such as Owindia a hero of heroes.

The Indians had eaten their breakfast before the sun had risen above the tree tops. They then began to make ready for some immediate movement. Owindia watched them closely. Not a word had been said about taking her back to the Post. She was tired after the weary night vigil, and she longed for rest. From what she had heard about the Chilcats seeking revenge upon the white traders she began to feel that they had forgotten their promise to her. She must, therefore, find out as soon as possible what they intended to do. The chief's son was standing not far away talking with several braves. Walking quietly up to him she remained perfectly still until he suddenly turned and saw her.

"What does the Ayana squaw want?" he asked, "and why does she come to the chief's son? She has no heart and no eyes for him."

"The Chilcat brave speaks true," was the calm reply. "Owindia has come to save her own people. Her heart is with them, but her body is with the Chilcats. Will the chief's son keep his promise he made to her last night, and take her back to the Post?"

"The chief's son always keeps his word," was the reply. "He will take her back to the Post. But first let the Ayana squaw tell how many white traders there are."

"Owindia cannot tell," came the low response. "The white men are her friends. But let the Chilcats be careful how they come near the Post."

"The Chilcats are not afraid of the white traders," and the leader looked around proudly upon his men as he spoke. "In one night the Chilcats will be within the Post, some of the white traders will be dead, and the rest will go back as prisoners to the coast. The Ayana maiden will go, too. Does she think to get away from the chief's son so soon?"

Owindia's heart sank at these words, though she presented a brave face to the boaster. She felt there was only too much truth in his words, and that the defenders at the Post had a very slim chance of escape against that determined and ruthless body of warriors. They had come a long way, and were not to be easily deprived of their prey.

It was not long before the whole band of Chilcats were ready for departure. They were well armed with muskets they had obtained from the white traders along the coast. They carried pistols, too, sharp knives and hunting-axes. They were a formidable band of men, two hundred strong, of whom a force three times their number might have good reason to fear. They advanced with an easy motion, and scarcely a sound did they make as they threaded the forest straight toward the Post.

Owindia, surrounded by several warriors, including the chief's son, walked some distance behind. She knew from their action that their motive for leaving the camp was not to restore her to her own people or to the white traders. What they had in view she could not guess as no one confided to her the secret.

After crossing the wild meadow the Indians began to spread out to the right and to the left. Ere long all had disappeared among the trees except two who remained with the maiden. These led her straight toward the Post, over the very way she had recently traversed. Reaching the open where the white men would be likely to see them, the two braves placed Owindia in front, while they walked behind keeping very close to each other. The maiden thus protected them, and it was not likely that the defenders of the Post would fire upon a woman. Owindia was then ordered to go forward, and she, thinking at first that they were to fulfil their promise to her, readily obeyed. Her step quickened, and soon she would have increased it to a run had not strong hands been laid upon her when they came within speaking distance of the Post.

"Why does the squaw hurry?" asked the Indian who was detaining her. "Does she think to get away from the Chilcat braves? She is mistaken then, for she must stay here."

"What does the brave mean?" Owindia replied, turning and looking into his face.

"Does not the Ayana squaw speak the white men's tongue?"

"Ah, ah," came slowly from the maiden's lips.

"Speak, then, to the white traders, and tell them to come out to meet the Chilcat braves, and hold a Council here in the open. Say to them that they are many, and the Chilcat warriors who stand here are only two. They bring a message from the chief's son. He does not wish to fight against the white traders. He would be their friend. Let them, therefore, come and talk the matter over with the messengers he has sent. The Ayana squaw must say these words, for though the Chilcat braves who stand by her side cannot speak the words of the white men, they will understand much of what she says. If she fails to speak what is told her she will never see her own people again."

With fast-beating heart, and bent head Owindia listened to the brave's words. She comprehended now the treachery of the Chilcats' design. She thought of the rest of the band who had separated at the wild meadow. The meaning was all clear to her. They were lying in ambush, hidden among the trees not far off, ready to hurl themselves upon the white traders if they fell into the trap which had been laid for them. Her eyes intuitively sought the forest, and she imagined she could see many forms slinking along the edge. The braves noted her look, and read its meaning.

"The warriors are there," said the spokesman. "They are watching, and will know what the squaw says."

"But what are they there for?" Owindia demanded, now looking the Indian full in the face.

"To watch the Council. They wish to be near to see the great white warriors. They have heard much about them, and now desire to look upon them."

At these words Owindia drew herself up to her full height. She was no longer a cringing Indian girl, but a woman thrilled by a nobleness of purpose which could meet suffering and death without a tremor. The white people were in danger. Should she repeat those words and draw them forth the blame would be upon her own head. Natsatt would come, she was sure of that, and how could she see him surrounded by the Coast wolves, and either killed before her very eyes or taken back across the mountains for a worse fate? Would she not be a traitor, and what would her father say? It was not so much through reason as by natural perception and instinct of the wild that she arrived at this conclusion.

"Will the squaw speak?"

The brave's voice startled her, and she glanced quickly toward him.

"Owindia will speak," she replied. "What else is there for her to do?"

"Be careful what you say," came the warning. "Speak only such words as you were told."

A faint expression of contempt, mingled with triumph might have been detected upon Owindia's face as she turned away from the brave at her side. She looked toward the Post. It was as silent as death. The barricade stood out grim and defiant. It was but a small structure there in the wilderness, defended by only a handful of men. Yet it was standing boldly up before a hostile band of natives, who for long years had held the land in subjection and cruel bondage. It was the sign of the advent of a new day, the prelude of the coming of a dominant race, strong, progressive, and grasping. The Chilcats might beat down those wooden walls, they might annihilate the defenders, and for a time seem to conquer. But they could not through pillage and slaughter stem the current which had already set in small at first, but increasing in force and intensity until it had swept the power from their grasp. Owindia knew nothing of this, neither did she realise how great was the import of her own heroic action in seeking to save the lives of those few white traders, the forelopers of a varied throng yet to come. Her thoughts were upon her lover. He was behind those walls, and him she must save, no matter what the cost to herself. No sign of life could she see at the Post, though she was well aware that watchful eyes were peering through the port-holes of the fortification. She was not far away, and could, therefore, be easily heard.

"White traders," she began in a clear, firm voice, "the Chilcats ask you to come out here to meet them, to talk with them. But do not come. The whole band is lying among the trees waiting to fall upon the white men, and kill them. Owindia gives the warning. She speaks true."

The last words had barely left her lips, ere she was rudely seized by the arm, and hurried away from the open, back, amidst the forest, back to the lurking, expectant Chilcats.

CHAPTER XIX

SHROUDED LIGHT

A FEELING of despair swept over Owindia as the forest hid the Post from view, for she believed she had seen it for the last time. She knew that the Chilcats would be very angry at her for what she had done. She saw them emerge from the trees where they had been hidden. With what fierce eyes they beheld her, and she would not have been surprised had they fallen upon her in their fury and torn her to pieces. They were cruel and blood-thirsty for such a deed, so she thought. Instead, however, they hurried her back to their camping place, where they forced her to sit upon the ground while they surrounded her in a formidable, menacing circle.

The clouds of night had passed, and the sun was slanting down among the numerous tree tops. The day was bright and warm, but Owindia shivered as she sat there awaiting the verdict of her enemies. Her head ached, and her entire body was weary. The strain of the excitement through which she had passed, and the want of sleep were plainly visible upon her face and form. Her eyes stared forth with an unnatural light, which at first the Indians did not notice. Strange thoughts were rushing through her brain. The babble of voices about her fell meaningless upon her ears. She heard nothing of the harsh words of condemnation which came from the lips of the baffled Chilcats. Gradually the dusky figures at her side were transformed, and she saw in their stead a band of her own people, all armed ready to drive back the invaders. She was watching them as they crept through the forest. She heard the cries of death, and the yells of victory. She saw her father leading his warriors, and beheld the look of triumph upon his face as he saw the Chilcats fleeing before the attack. Her heart thrilled with pride, and she gave vent to a laugh, a loud laugh of joy to think that at last their land was free from the enemy. She sprang to her feet and began waving her arms in the wildest excitement. And he was there, too, Natsatt her lover, driving the Coast tribe before him. How he was fighting, and she was cheering him on.

The strange look in Owindia's eyes, and her excited manner startled the Chilcat warriors. They ceased their talking and stared upon the maiden standing before them. Well did they know the meaning of that expression upon her face, and the rapid words which were pouring from her lips. They shrank back with superstitious awe and dread, and more than one Indian laid his hand upon his gun. An evil spirit had entered into this Ayana squaw, so they believed, and was possessing her whole being. To them this incident was most disconcerting. The bad spirit was abroad and had entered into this woman. It had evidently been surrounding them for days, and had been working against them. No doubt the white men had something to do with the matter, and were inciting the spirit against the Chilcats. It would be necessary, therefore, to get rid of this evil one as speedily as possible. Already a feeling of fear was spreading among the warriors. Every time Owindia spoke or approached them they drew back and looked apprehensively around as if expecting that hideous creatures were about to emerge from the forest depths. Those braver than the rest realised that unless some action was immediately taken the courage of the Indians would soon ebb away, and their hope of defeating the white traders would be at an end.

It was a pathetic sight to see Owindia standing in the midst of these men, talking at random, and occasionally pointing among the trees, and calling their attention to imaginary foes.

"Ha, ha," she laughed, "the Chilcats are running away. They are afraid of the Ayana warriors. Look, look, the chief's son has fallen; he is no more. Never again will he trouble Owindia."

These words, added to what she had already said, caused more than a score of warriors to seize their guns, and train them upon the maiden. They determined to delay no longer. The evil spirit must be driven out, and the only way to do it would be to put the maiden to death. The beautiful picture she made with flushed face, and form drawn to her full height caused them to hesitate for a few moments. Never before had they seen such a squaw so full of grace and perfect loveliness. Hardened though they were their hearts were not altogether unresponsive to a certain pleasure in true beauty. They could worship it in the surge of the ocean, in the ripple of the streams, in the glory of the sunset, and in the laughter of the flowers. It was, therefore, but natural that they should shrink from taking the life of one of whom they had heard so much, and their own eyes had seen.

And as they hesitated, and Owindia's life hung by a thread, Klukwan, the messenger, stepped forward, and raised his arm for his companions to desist. He had been a silent witness of the whole proceeding, and his heart stirred within him at the idea of putting the maiden to death. In fact ever since she had entered the camp he had found it almost impossible to keep his eyes away from her face. How he longed to possess her for his own. She appealed to him not only for her beauty, but for her courage and modest demeanour.

"Kill not the squaw," he began. "Why should she be put to death? When did Chilcat warriors ever do such a thing? If the evil spirit had entered into an Ayana brave Klukwan would not say a word. But this is a squaw, daughter of a great chief. That chief is the Chilcats' enemy, but he is a brave warrior, and has a strong heart. The Chilcats honour a brave man, even though he is their enemy. This maiden has a strong heart. She saved Klukwan's life in Klitonda's lodge, and Klukwan cannot forget. The evil spirit is in her, and it must not be allowed to get away or it will do harm to the Chilcats. Bind the squaw fast to a tree, that she may be safe. The spirit cannot get away from her body now that it has taken up its abode there."

Stepping up to the maiden Klukwan placed his right hand upon her arm.

"Does the Ayana squaw dream?" he asked. "Does she see strange sights? Is the evil spirit speaking through her lips?"

Owindia turned and looked upon the brave, although she saw him not. A far away expression shone in her dilated eyes, as lifting her hand she pointed out among the trees.

"See, they come!" she cried. "The Chilcats are among the Ayana people; they will steal the women, and kill the men."

Then she began to sing in the monotonous Indian fashion a fragment of a song she had often heard around the camp fire at night. It was but one of the numerous compositions which had been handed down from generation to generation. Each had added something to the various pieces, legends, deeds of bravery, and love, until in some cases the crazy jumbles were of great length, requiring often an hour or more for their rendition. Owindia learned only the ones which appealed to her heart and mind, especially those telling of the deeds of her forefathers, and their heroism in days gone by. It was only natural, therefore, that her favourite piece should be sung when her mind was so wildy excited.

> "Hark! I hear the Chilcats coming.
> They are coming o'er the ranges;
> They will steal our wives and daughters,
> They will slay our sons and husbands.
> Rouse, Ayana, to the battle,
> Drive the Chilcats o'er the ranges,
> Free our land and save our people,
> Come, Ayana, come, come!"

Having ended these words in the long drawn wail of the Indian manner, a sudden fancy seemed to seize Owindia's mind. She began to sing snatches of songs and hymns which her mother had taught. Some were bright, and gay; others were sombre, and full of much pathos. Her voice was as clear and full of sweetness as when Natsatt had first heard it out in the lodge in the wilderness.

The Chilcat warriors were now more firmly convinced than ever that the maiden was possessed of the evil spirit. They were not accustomed to such singing, and the tunes of the English songs and hymns made no appeal to their hearts. The singer must not be allowed to abide among them. Nothing but harm would come from her presence. Death was the only remedy. Such was the opinion of all the Chilcats when they had considered the matter except Klukwan, the messenger. He would not agree to such a proposition, and appealed to the chief's son, who had taken but little part in the discussion.

"Klukwan will stand by the Ayana squaw," he said. "She shall not be put to death. Let any warrior raise his gun against her and he will answer to Klukwan. Make the squaw fast to a tree, so she cannot escape. Let the chief's son speak."

Thus appealed to, and with the eyes of his men turned upon him there was nothing for the weak vacillating creature to do but to give voice to his thoughts. He knew only too well that what Klukwan said he would do would be carried out to the bitter end. He did not wish to have friction among his band at such a critical moment, when unity was needed in their attack upon the whites. He believed, too, that some of the warriors would side with Klukwan, and disastrous might be the result. According to the superstitious idea which had been instilled into him from childhood he felt that the maiden should die. But he wished to delay her death now, and put off the performing of it in order to keep peace. Something might happen, so he thought, which would not make it necessary. She might get well, or Klukwan might change his mind and consent to her death. That she should recover he earnestly desired for he wished to possess the maiden, and take her back in triumph to the coast. Such a beautiful creature added to his list of wives would make him the envy and admiration of other tribes far and near, as well as among those of his own people. He accordingly gave it as his opinion that the possessed squaw should be taken to the very tree where her father, Klitonda, had been bound, and there made fast.

Owindia made no attempt to resist the rough hands which were laid upon her. She permitted herself to be led to the tree where she was securely tied. She continued to talk, however, about the coming of the Chilcats, and occasionally she would sing. But as the day wore away she became silent, and her head drooped. She made no effort to support herself, but allowed her whole weight to bear upon the moose-hide thongs with which she was bound. Her face was hot and flushed, which even the air of evening could not cool. It was the heat of fever which was raging through her whole body. When night shut down she was left alone, all the warriors having gone to surround the Post. But she knew nothing of time or events. She was living in that strange world of wild unrealities, where the mind seems to depart from its earthly tenement and roams through vast vistas of unknown regions. As the darkness deepened, and the air grew colder her ravings returned. She called for Natsatt, and implored him to come to her. Now she was with her father out upon the trail, and again she was a little child playing by the side of her mother along the river's bank. She sang, too, not the songs of the Indians, but the ones her mother had taught her. Night, desolate night, covered her form, but a darkness more terrible shrouded her mind, though it could not silence the music of her voice which floated forth among the trees clear, sweet, and plaintive.

CHAPTER XX

THE CALL OF THE HEART

WHEN Natsatt reached the Post after his experience in the forest, and his conflict with the Chilcat, he found that Dan was watching for his return, and eagerly opened the gate in the fortification for him to enter. The rest of the men were astir. In fact a number of them had been on guard all through the night, and were weary after their fruitless watch. As soon as breakfast was over they threw themselves into their bunks, and ere long were fast asleep. Natsatt noted that his companions desired to shun him. They neither spoke to him nor made any remark as to his absence. A feeling of conspiracy seemed to prevail which he could not comprehend. He knew why several hated him, but could not understand why all should turn against him.

Dan alone was unchanged, and to him Natsatt told of his experience during the past night, and of his victory over the cowardly assailant. To all this the Ranger listened most intently. At times his brow knitted, and his eyes expressed surprise.

"I can't understand it, lad," he said, when Natsatt had ended. "The lassie seems to be a prisoner among them, but why she did not leave when she had an opportunity, puzzles me."

"She went there herself," Natsatt replied, "to save us and her own people. I forced that much from the Chilcat when I had the measly wretch upon his back. He didn't wish to tell me at first, but when he felt the sharp point of my hunting-knife tickling his ribs in no delicate manner he was quite ready to speak. He was lucky to get off with only the tickling, I can tell you that. He deserved the knife right up to the handle for his base attack."

"I'm glad you let him off, lad. Never shed blood if you can possibly avoid it. Besides, he was down, and could not help himself. So the lassie went away to save us, he told you. It was certainly brave of her. But it's just what her mother would have done. She would sacrifice anything for the sake of those she loved. But there, you go off and have a sleep, while I think over what you have told me. We must save the lassie, but how it is to be done is another matter."

Natsatt made his way to his bunk, but he found it impossible to sleep. Owindia was ever before his mind, and he reproached himself for having left her alone with the Chilcats. Why had he not rushed forward and rescued her from their midst? he asked himself over and over again. It would have been better to die by her side, trying to save her, than to live without her. He thought of what the Chilcat had told him. Would Owindia really become the wife of the chief's son?

Would she go back with him over the mountain, and he would never see her again? The idea was too horrible to be entertained even for a moment. He sprang from his bunk. Why was he lying there when she whom he loved better than life itself was in danger of being snatched away from him forever? He must go to her. Nothing could stop him now.

Hardly knowing what course to pursue in order to carry out his design, he made his way out of the building toward the great door of the barricade. On the threshold he stopped, for there before him were Dan and several of the men, peering intently through several of the port-holes, which had been made in the fortification. That they were deeply interested was evident from their excited manner. Natsatt pushed his way among them and at length caught a glimpse of the open space outside the Post. At once a half-smothered cry of astonishment escaped his lips, and pushing aside the man nearest him he put his face close to the hole to obtain a better view. And then he saw all that was taking place; Owindia, with the two Chilcats by her side. What did it mean? he asked himself. What was she doing there? And as he watched he saw her turn her face toward the Post and speak. He could hear every word distinctly, and at first he was puzzled as to her meaning. Then the truth flashed upon him. She was sacrificing herself to save them. She would be true to the white men. He hardly heard what she said in conclusion, for his brain was in a whirl of excitement. He knew now that the Chilcats had brought her there in order to betray the traders, and how angry they would be when they learned what she had said. What would happen when she went back to the camp? They would no doubt subject her to much cruelty, and perhaps put her to death. No, it must not be permitted. Now was the time to rescue her. He forgot for the moment what she had said about the Indians lurking on the border of the forest. He saw only the two Chilcats who were with Owindia. He could fight them, and recover his loved one.

He turned away from the port-hole and walked rapidly toward the large door. But Dan was by his side in an instant, and laid his hand upon the young man's shoulder.

"You must not do it," he said. "It's too great a risk. The devils are among the trees as thick as flies. The whole bunch of us could not save the girl now. The Chilcats want to get us out there to cut us down in no time."

"But I must save her," Natsatt protested. "Do you think I mind the whole Chilcat tribe when Owindia is in danger? Let me go to her," and he tried to free himself from the Ranger's grasp.

"No, you don't," was the grim reply. "You're too valuable for me to lose. You're a little hot-headed now. You shan't go through yon door, so make up your mind to that."

Natsatt knew that resistance would be useless. He began to see, too, how vain would be the undertaking. He must wait for some other opportunity. Dan, seeing the look upon his face loosened his grip and peered again through the nearest port-hole.

"They've gone!" he exclaimed, "and have taken the lassie with them. Poor thing! she'll have her own trouble, I'm thinking with that bunch of wolves. Anyway, their little scheme didn't work, thanks to the girl. But they'll try something else, never fear, and we must be on our guard against them. I'm beginning to see now that we have some shrewd determined customers to deal with."

All through the day Natsatt paced restlessly up and down in the open between the store and the barricade. He could not sleep, so offered to stay on guard. He did this with a purpose, as a plan was being evolved in his mind and he needed the freedom of the night to carry it into effect. He kept a careful watch upon the open outside the Post, but no Indian could he observe. Silence brooded over the land. There was stillness, too, within the building, for all seemed to feel that night would bring an attack from the enemy. The men spent much of the time looking after their guns, and ammunition. Of the latter they had not a large supply. What they had brought with them was simply for hunting purposes, with never a thought of an engagement with the natives. Dan divided the powder and balls among the men, advising them at the same time to reserve their fire as much as possible, and not to shoot at random. In the past they had been somewhat prodigal of their ammunition, shooting at whatever they came across, whether bird or animal. Hence, when all was divided they had but twenty rounds apiece, and they well knew how little this would serve them in case of a serious or prolonged siege.

There was trouble, too, from another source. Their supply of provisions, never at any time large, was becoming much reduced. Since the arrival of the Chilcats the hunters had not gone to the hills after sheep, and now it was impossible to leave the Post. A few days at the most would see them almost on the verge of starvation unless they could add something to their larder, which under the circumstances did not seem very probable. It was, therefore, but natural that a deep feeling of dissatisfaction should prevail among the men. They felt that they had been badly treated, and blamed Dan for bringing them into the country. They had come for trading purposes, and not to fight Indians. They would not have minded a skirmish now and then with the natives if the advantage had been all on their own side. But to be surrounded by a strong implacable enemy, and to be cooped up like prisoners, with an insufficient supply of food was galling in the extreme. They did not complain to Dan, but aired their grievances among themselves.

Natsatt knew but little of what was taking place, as they did not admit him into their confidence. They were naturally jealous of the half-breed, for they noted how Dan talked much to the young man, and seemed to enjoy having him with him more than the others. But Natsatt did not worry over what his companions felt or said. It was Owindia who occupied his mind, and the one purpose of his life was to reach, and rescue her from the Chilcats. Dan would not give his permission to leave again, he was quite sure of that. Nothing could be done during the day, so he must wait until night.

The long afternoon wore slowly away, and it seemed to Natsatt that the sun was longer than usual disappearing beyond the tree tops. Slowly it settled and at length darkness stole over the land. Then Natsatt was free and ready for action. He had been relieved of guard and there was no work within the Post demanding his attention. His companions were seated in the building, enjoying their after supper smoke, so he slipped quietly away, and moved toward the fortification close to the river. He could have gone out by the door, but that would have betrayed his scheme, besides imperilling his companions in case the Indians suddenly arrived and found the door unfastened. During the afternoon he had thought out his plan of escape. He would mount one of the large wooden poles which supported the barricade from the inside, and thus scale the wall. The darkness covered his movement, and as he made very little noise the men on guard were not aware of what was taking place near at hand. It did not take him long to spring with the agility of a wild cat up the long leaning brace, and from there to the top of the pointed posts above. With some difficulty he threw himself over and holding fast by his hands lowered himself to his full arms' length. Then dropping quickly to the ground, he sped away among the trees, and hid for a brief space among a friendly thicket of fir bushes. He was armed with pistol, hunting knife, and small axe, so he did not fear an attack of one or even two Chilcats. But he must keep clear of the main body of the enemy, for against them he would have no chance at all.

To one less accustomed to the forest the difficulty and peril of the undertaking would have been almost unbearable. But Natsatt was at home in the darkest night amid the wilderness. The black objects whether stumps or stones which stood out with startling weirdness, had no terror for him. It was necessary for him to be extremely cautious lest he should stumble unawares upon the enemy. Carefully he groped his way among the trees, keeping close to the river, as he believed that the Chilcats would come more in a straight line toward the Post. He was thankful that he had escaped the vigilance of the spies, who no doubt were lurking somewhere near. On and on he moved, gliding with swiftness from tree to tree, and always peering watchfully ahead. When he believed that he was opposite the Chilcat camp, he turned sharply to the left. Before him lay the ridge of ragged rocks, on the side of which Owindia had made her escape from the few

Indians who had lured her thither. Over almost the same place where the fire had been Natsatt moved, little knowing what had recently taken place there but a short time before.

Nearing at length the camping ground he advanced more cautiously and partly expected to see the light of a fire darting among the trees. But in this he was disappointed. Nothing but intense blackness surrounded him. He began to wonder what had become of the Indians. Had they all gone to the Post, and were they already surrounding the place ready to make their night attack? If so what had become of Owindia? Surely they had not taken her with them!

He paused for a while to listen, but nothing could he hear, except the beating of his own heart. He was about to move forward when a sound fell upon his ears which stayed his steps and sent the blood coursing rapidly through his veins. It was the voice of some one singing, and in an instant he knew it must be none other than Owindia's. He could not catch the words though the tune was familiar. Why was she singing? he wondered, and where could she be? Not by a fire, that was evident, or else he should have seen the light. Had she been left behind, and was she singing to keep up her courage? The thought that she was alone gave him a thrill of joy. He could reach her side, talk to her, and induce her to come with him back to the Post.

Hesitating no longer he made straight for the place from whence the sound came. The song still continued, and ere long he was but a short distance away. He peered through the darkness but could see nothing. The song suddenly ceased and all was quiet. Natsatt's heart beat fast, and he called "Owindia, Owindia," in a low voice. Receiving no response he raised his voice a little louder, but still no answer. Thinking it very strange that he could get no reply, and feeling sure that Owindia was but a few steps away, he felt in his pocket, found a match, and struck it. As the light flared up he looked eagerly around, expecting to see her standing before him. The trees stood on every hand silent and grim, though nowhere could he see the maiden. A feeling of awe crept into his heart as the tiny light died out in his fingers. Had something happened to Owindia? he wondered, and was this her spirit haunting the forest? He took a few steps forward, and then pausing, struck another match. This time his effort was rewarded, for as the light illumined the darkness for a few seconds his eyes rested upon the form of the maiden standing upright against a fir-tree about three paces to his right.

CHAPTER XXI

BY THE WATER-GATE

THE match which Natsatt held burnt down, scorched his fingers, and went out. But no physical pain did he feel. The agony and rage which possessed his heart numbed his body to any other lesser sensation. It was a terrible ten seconds as he stood there in the darkness with that picture of the one he loved burned upon his brain. Then he leaped to her side, and spoke to her, pleading with her to speak to him, and tell who had done the dastardly deed. His words were all in vain, for Owindia gave no sign that she was aware of his presence. Wondering much, Natsatt again struck a match, and peered keenly into her face. He beheld her eyes filled with a wild unnatural light, and not looking at him, but staring straight into the forest. He noted how drawn and haggard was her face, and limp and helpless her body. In an instant the truth flashed upon him, and filled him with an overwhelming dismay. Was this his own Owindia, the one he loved better than life itself? Could it be possible that her reason had deserted her? He had loved her before with all the passion of his ardent nature. But now a deep yearning pity mingled with his affection. She needed his help more than ever.

Drawing forth his hunting-knife he severed the bonds which bound her to the tree and, her body thus released slipped in a helpless heap at his very feet. Quickly stooping, he caught her in his arms. He seized her hands in his and for the first time noted how hot they were. He felt her face and found that it, too, was burning with a fire which he knew could only come from a raging fever. "Owindia, Owindia," he murmured, "speak to Natsatt. He is here." Then he lowered his head and imprinted a kiss upon those hot lips. "You are mine," he continued, "and nothing but death can separate us now. Oh, to meet the villains who treated you thus cruelly!"

Next the helplessness of his position swept upon him. What was he to do? Owindia could not walk, and how was he to get her back to the Post? The Chilcats were already before the fortification, he believed, and would surely capture him should he attempt to go in that direction. But suppose he did reach the Post how could he gain admittance? The Indians would not let him pass, and there would be no way by which he could communicate with his companions. He was certainly in a difficult position. He could not remain where he was for if the Chilcats returned and found him there his situation would not be enviable. Neither could he build a fire, for the light would surely attract any native who might be prowling near. He must get Owindia away and at once. Perhaps he could find a sheltered place beyond the ridge of rocks where he could build a fire, and thus lie in wait for an opportunity to steal back to the Post.

While these thoughts were passing through his mind Owindia was still lying quietly in his arms. She had not spoken a word since the song had died upon her lips. She was not a heavy burden, in fact her lover was surprised at the lightness of her body. He could carry her without much trouble, he felt sure of that. Scarcely had he taken a step forward than she began to talk in her wild rambling manner. Now she was urging on the Ayana people, calling to them to drive out the Chilcats. Again it was of her father she spoke. He was in danger and she was trying to get to him. Then Natsatt's name dropped from her lips, and thrilled the heart of the young man. Why did he not come to save her from the enemy? she asked. Had he forgotten her that he was so long in coming?

"Hush, darling," Natsatt replied, pressing her more closely to his breast. "Natsatt is here. Do you not feel his arms around you? He will save you. Don't be afraid, little one."

Still she babbled on, and as Natsatt struggled slowly through the darkness, his heart was heavy within him. Occasionally he stumbled, and with difficulty regained his feet. His burden which seemed so light at first became much heavier, and at times he was forced to lay her upon the ground that he might rest his arms a little. Up and up he steadily climbed to the top of the rocky ridge, then down the opposite side straight toward the river. How long the way seemed. He had never realised that the distance was so great. The trees in the valley were smaller, and much closer together, which made travelling extremely difficult. Natsatt's progress was accordingly very slow, and it seemed a long time ere he at length came near the river. Here he paused, and placing Owindia tenderly upon the ground groped around for a suitable place to build a fire. The bank of the river at this locality was steep and rugged where the ice had torn away the earth in its onward sweep during the great spring rush. In one place a huge hole had been gouged out of the embankment, and as Natsatt examined it as well as the darkness would permit, he considered it a favourable spot to make his fire. The high bank would somewhat hide the light from being seen by the Chilcats. Searching around among the trees he gathered an armful of dry boughs and sticks and soon had the satisfaction of seeing a cheerful blaze illumining the night. Next he cut a liberal supply of fresh fir boughs and made a comfortable bed near the fire. Upon these he laid Owindia, and taking off his own buck-skin jacket placed it over her body. The maiden made no attempt to move, but remained perfectly still and quiet. Then Natsatt sat down to keep watch, and to replenish the fire whenever such work was needed.

Hour after hour the young man stayed on guard. At times Owindia fell into a fitful sleep, only to awake with a cry, from which she wandered off into other worlds, babbling of them in an unconnected manner.

Natsatt kept his eyes fixed most of the time upon the maiden's face. How he longed for that vacant expression to vanish, and to hear her speak to him as of old. With her in her right mind the camp in the wild would have been a most blissful spot. He wondered how long the fever would last. Suppose she should die, and leave him alone? How could he live without her? Oh, to have a doctor near, or some one who knew what to do to help her! Would Ranger Dan know? he mused. He had lived so long among the natives perhaps he had learned something from them. Owindia must not die. He looked up into the heavens, and saw the stars twinkling down upon them. He had never thought much about higher things. He had frequently attended the little churches at the mission stations on the other side of the mountains, and had listened to the words of the missionaries. But so full of strength was he that he never felt the need of other help beyond his own. To-night, however, it was different, and he began to wonder what was above those stars. Was there any one who could help him in his present trouble? He was thinking thus when the report of a gun winged through the darkness and fell upon his ears. Leaping to his feet he sprang up the bank, and listened intently. He had not long to wait, for in a few seconds the sounds of a regular fusillade reached him. Then he knew that the battle was on in earnest, and he longed to be at the Post to assist his comrades. The shots seemed quite near, and ran in a circle around the spot where the Post was situated. The Indians had evidently surrounded the place, and were making a desperate assault upon the besieged. Presently yells of derision, and at times, of pain, split the night, showing plainly that the white men were meeting the attack with spirited determination. Natsatt thought of the insufficient supply of ammunition at the Post, and he wondered how long the besiegers could be kept at bay. When the powder and balls gave out there would be nothing left but a hand to hand struggle. He shuddered as he thought of the only outcome of such an encounter. The whites would be out-numbered ten to one, and what chance would they have against such sturdy and blood-thirsty opponents? Could his companions hold out until morning? he asked himself. Glancing away to the left he saw the horizon brightening with the light of early dawn. The distant mountain peaks were catching the first faint gleam, but the world below was still lost in the mantle of night.

Natsatt piled more wood upon the fire, and sat down by Owindia's side. No change could he see in her staring eyes which often looked upon him with no mark of recognition. His heart was growing heavier, and a deep sigh escaped his lips as he listened to the firing mingled with yells in the distance. How could he ever reach the Post, and if he did the defenders would be so occupied that they would not hear him. What was he to do? Must he allow Owindia to die there by the river without making an effort to save her life. Again he made his way up the steep bank, and paced for a time to and fro in an effort to formulate some line of action. Dawn was stealing down the mountains now, and bringing into relief objects near at hand. His face was turned upstream, and he was about to discontinue his walking in order to go back to Owindia, when his eyes rested upon an object which brought him to a sudden stand-still. Then a thrill of hope shot into his heart as he looked, and hurrying forward leaped down the bank. There upon the shore, securely tied with a moose-hide thong was a large canoe, which evidently belonged to the Chilcats. Only this one could he see, although he believed that there must be others not far away. He upbraided himself for not having thought of the canoes before. The Chilcats had come downstream in them, and there must be several somewhere in the vicinity. In this craft he saw the solution of the problem which had become so difficult.

He found several paddles lying in the bottom, just where they had been left by the late occupants. Quickly untying the painter, he gave the canoe a shove and sprang in. It did not take him long to reach the place where Owindia was lying. Lifting her in his arms he laid her first upon the ground. Then gathering up the fir boughs he made with them a comfortable bed in the bottom of the canoe. This done and with the maiden lying upon them, he pushed off, and the current being strong the canoe was soon speeding swiftly down the river.

Natsatt steered close to the shore, keeping as much as possible within the dark shadows of the tall trees along the bank. He knew it would not do to run any risk, as Chilcats might be skulking near the river, and especially so when he came near the Post. Presently he changed his mind, and heading the craft for mid-stream ran it across to the opposite side of the river. He felt safer now, and could obtain a better view of the Post and its surroundings. It was too dark to see far, but as he looked he could tell that the firing from the Post had ceased entirely. He was surprised at this and wondered if his companions' ammunition had given out already. Perhaps they were reserving their scanty supply for the assault upon the barricade. He knew that Dan was too wise a general to allow his men to spend their last charges in a futile fire.

By this time he was almost opposite the Post, so turning the bow of the canoe he re-crossed the stream, and in a few minutes was close to the water-gate. Here he had hoped to make his voice heard, without any danger of the Indians seeing or hearing him. But what was his astonishment to find the gate unfastened. He could hardly believe it possible, and thought it must be a careless over-sight on the part of the defenders. Had the Chilcats made an attack there they could have gained an easy admittance. Opening the gate he ran the canoe inside, and leaping out shut to the big portal, and made it fast with the heavy bar kept for the purpose.

Leaving Owindia in the canoe he hurried up to the store, and was surprised to see none of the men inside the fortification. What did it all mean? Surely they had not been shot, and crawling within the building were huddled together there. The door leading to the store was closed. He almost dreaded to open it, fearing the worst. A strange silence and awe pervaded the place. At length he lifted his hand, opened the door, and entered. First he went into the large room, where the men were in the habit of gathering. Finding no one there he passed into the store, but stopped short on the threshold, for there before him was Ranger Dan standing alone in the centre of the room. Upon the old man's face was a fierce look of defiance. His form was drawn to its full height, and his hands clutched firmly his musket. Then the truth flashed across Natsatt's mind with a stabbing intensity. The men had deserted the Post, and had left their leader to the mercy of the Chilcats!

CHAPTER XXII

TRAITORS

NATSATT had been absent from the Post about two hours before he was missed. Dan wanted to see him to discuss certain matters in connection with their mode of defence. But he could not be found. Search was made in every part of the building, and along the barricade, but without avail. The gates of the fortification were all fastened, so it was evident that he had not departed by means of them. Dan's mind was much perturbed as to what had happened to the young man. He was his main stay, and at this critical time his help was greatly needed.

The men discussed the matter with one another, and threw out hints of desertion. They were ready to surmise almost anything of an evil nature concerning the half-breed. Their knowing nods and insinuations angered the Ranger. He believed that there was some good reason for Natsatt's departure, and turned sharply upon his men.

" Don't be too sure that the lad has deserted," he said. " Where could he go if he left the Post? This is the safest place in the whole country. So cease your foolish talk about desertion. He'll turn up in good time, never fear."

"He's got Injun blood in his veins," replied one, "and wherever that streak runs you can never tell what will happen. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if he's gone and joined the Chilcats to fight against us. He thinks we'll be wiped out here, and so he wishes to be on the safe side."

"Never!" Dan retorted. "He would not do such a thing; he's too much of a man for that. And as for Indian blood, the less you say about it the better. My wife was an Indian woman, and my only child had Indian blood in her veins. And, listen, the child of my dead child is out there among those Chilcat wolves. I would give all I possess to have her with me by my side. Say nothing more about Indian blood, I warn you. It touches too deeply the sacred things of my heart."

The men said nothing more to the Ranger just then. They knew from his words and actions that he was feeling keenly about Natsatt's departure, and the reference which had been made to Indian blood. The ones who were not on duty at the fortification gathered in a little group in one corner of the room, and engaged in earnest conversation. Their voices were low, and they kept an eye upon Dan who was walking to and fro in the store. They could see him every time he passed the door.

"Are we to stay here to be murdered by those red devils?" Pete Tarquill asked, looking around upon his companions. "We can't stand them off for any length of time. Our ammunition is mighty low, and our grub is about gone. Why, I haven't had a good square meal for days, and now we're down to hard pan. What's the use of us remaining here and dying like rats?"

"That's what I say," replied Tim Burke. "What good can we do by staying? If we had been sent here to hold this place for the Queen against those Chilcats, it would be different. We didn't come in here to fight Indians; we came for trading purposes. I don't want to lose my skin for the strange whim of a half-cracked old man, who has come here after a treasure, as he calls it. Did you hear what he said about the child of his dead child being out yon? What did he mean by such words, I wonder?"

"Maybe that Injun squaw that the half-breed's smitten on is the one," spoke up Larry Dasan, who was still smarting over the knockout-blow he had received from Natsatt. "I believe he's come here looking for her. I've always had my suspicion that it was something more than trade that brought him into this hell of a hole. I don't believe he'll leave the place until he gets her, and that he'd be willing to sacrifice the whole bunch of us in the undertaking."

"Why not ask him?" Pete suggested. "If he finds that we are determined to go he might see the reason of the thing. And if he won't consent there is but one thing to do. The canoe is there by the water-gate, and who is to stop us from going? It will not be Ranger Dan I am certain of that."

The men were now determined to abandon the place as soon as possible, and Pete Tarquill was chosen to interview their leader about the matter. He did not relish the task, but some one had to do it.

"I know what I shall get," he muttered. "His eyes would almost knock a man down, even though his fists don't. He's a hard customer to deal with, especially if any one opposes him."

Nevertheless he made his way to where Dan was striding up and down the room. The Ranger turned and looked upon him.

"Isn't it time to change the guard?" he asked. "It must be near midnight. I've been expecting the Indians for some time now. The dead of night is their favourite time for making an attack. They like to wait until people get drowsy and off their guard. But they won't catch us napping."

"Do you think it well to let them attack us?" Pete asked. "We haven't the ghost of a chance against the bunch that's opposing us. We have little ammunition, and our grub's about gone. We can't hold out for any length of time."

"What do you mean by not letting them attack us?" Dan demanded. "Do you want to rush them and have it all over in a short time. Yes, it would be a short time," and he gave a slight sarcastic laugh. "They'd wipe us out quicker than you could say jack-rabbit."

"No, that's not the game," Pete replied. "Let's take the canoe, and give them the slip. We can do it very well, and get far on our way before they suspect anything."

"Never!" burst from Dan's lips, while his hands clenched firmly together, and an angry light gleamed in his eyes. "I shall not leave, and all the Chilcats that ever crossed the mountains cannot make me leave until I get that child. We have twenty rounds each, and we shall give them such a hot reception that half of their number will bite the dust. We can hold out for two days, and by that time we can rush them. Think no more about leaving, but go and see that the guard is changed. Those who are not on duty had better get some sleep."

These words had barely left his lips before several sharp reports fell upon their ears. They started, and then rushed outside. All was in darkness there. Dan hurried to one of the port-holes and asked the man on duty what was the matter.

"The Injuns are outside," was the reply. "We saw their forms creeping upon us and we gave them a warm welcome. They have retreated to the woods. They were mistaken this time."

Dan immediately gave orders for all the men to go on duty, and scattered them along the barricade. It was only a few minutes before a regular volley came from the forest. The bullets sang over the fortification; they sank deep into the upstanding timbers, while several passed through the cracks between, and buried themselves into the store behind.

"Reserve your fire," Dan commanded, as he moved up and down the line. "We can't afford to waste a single shot. But when you see your man give it to him hot."

And this the men did. They waited in grim silence until they saw dim forms slinking through the gloom. The first volley which came from the wooden wall had an immediate effect, for yells of agony and derision split the night air. That the natives who were able had scurried back to the forest was quite evident, and from there continued their rain of death. How the defenders escaped some of the leaden missives was a wonder. But only one man was slightly wounded in the arm. Several times the men fired upon the Indians, and each time yells rang out through the darkness. An hour thus passed, and the Chilcat fire instead of lessening became more furious. They were shooting with greater care now, and the position of the besieged was becoming perilous in the extreme. At any instant several of them might be stretched lifeless upon the ground. The darkness, those slinking forms in the distance, and that constant fire, were all enough to chill the bravest heart. But the men who were guarding the Post were not noted for their great courage. They had never been trained to such a life as this. After a terrific volley from the enemy fiercer than any they had yet experienced, several of the men held a hurried conversation. Then three of them entered the store, and ere long returned carrying several bags upon their backs.

Word was passed from man to man, and at once a rush was made for the water-gate. The bar was withdrawn, the canoe shoved into the river, and in a few minutes the men were out in mid-stream heading their craft up the Segas River.

This flight was made at the moment when Dan had gone to the farther side of the barricade where the attack of the enemy was least expected. He wished to be certain that the Chilcats were not creeping upon them from that quarter. When he returned he was surprised not to find any men at the first port-hole. He hurried on to the second and found that also deserted. With a great fear in his heart concerning what had happened he hurried along the fortification until he came to the water-gate. Feeling round he found that the canoe was gone, and then his gravest fears were confirmed. He stood for a few minutes like a man stricken dumb. Then without thinking about the unbarred gate he made his way slowly back to the store. He examined the provisions, and found that they had been raided, and only a very small supply left. The firing of the Chilcats still continued and fell upon his ears with a sickening sensation. He realised now that his last hope was gone. But he would die fighting. He would show the Chilcats that he was no coward. He gripped his musket firmly in his hand. He felt to see if his pistol was in its place. He was not afraid to die, and perhaps it was just as well he thought. What was there for him to live for? he asked himself. His plan had failed, and why should he go back to the ways of civilisation? He was anxious now for the Indians to come. He longed to have one round with them for the injury they had done him. Let them come, he was ready.

And as he thus stood defiantly in the centre of the room, Natsatt appeared before him. At first he thought it must be the young man's ghost which had returned to mock him, and a slight laugh escaped his lips.

"Dan, Dan! what is it?" Natsatt cried, going up to the old man and laying his hand upon his arm. "Have the scoundrels gone? Have they deserted the Post, and left you alone?"

"Gone; the curs have gone!" was the fierce reply. "They have deserted me, and I thought that you had gone too."

"Did you think that I would leave you? Could you not trust me?" Natsatt responded. "I left the Post last night. But I did it to save Owindia. Could you blame me when I knew that she was among those wolves?"

"And did you find her?" questioned Dan with some of his old eagerness. "Did you bring her back?"

"Yes, I found her, and have brought her with me, but —"

"But what?" Dan demanded, noticing the young man hesitate.

"She is sick."

"Sick? do you say? What is the matter with her?"

"Fever, I fear, which has unbalanced her mind for a time. Is there anything we can do for her?"

"Where is she?" and Dan stepped to the door as if expecting to see the maiden in the outer room.

"She's in the canoe at the water-gate."

"In the canoe? At the water-gate? I don't understand. I thought the canoe was taken."

"Come," Natsatt replied, "I can't tell you all now. We must do something for Owindia at once. I shall tell you later all about it."

Forgotten for a time were the Indians as they hurried along the passage-way toward the canoe. Owindia was lying just as Natsatt had left her. Picking her up tenderly in his arms he carried her back to the building, and laid her upon the bed they had days before prepared for her. Little did they then think in what way it would be first used. By the light of the candle Dan peered down upon her hot flushed face and into her staring eyes.

"Poor lassie," he murmured. "It's a pity, a great pity. Yes, she's Klota's child, I can tell that at a glance. We must save her, lad," and he turned sharply around upon Natsatt who was standing quietly at his side.

"Yes," was the reply, "but how? What about the Chilcats out yonder? We can't do anything now that the rest have cleared out."

"True, true, I had forgotten about them for the time. They haven't been doing any shooting for the last few minutes. Perhaps they have given up the attack, and have gone back to their camp. You watch by the lassie while I slip outside, and see how things look."

Dan had been gone only a few seconds when he came bounding back into the store.

"Come quick!" he cried. "They're at the Post, and trying to get in."

Seizing his musket which he had laid aside, Natsatt hurried out of the building. Peering through a port-hole he could see the Chilcats right outside the barricade. When the fire from the Post ceased they had become emboldened and rushed forward. They did not yell but like the silence before the destroying tempest they endeavoured to scale the wall and capture the place. Several had looked in through the port-holes and saw no one inside. Some were climbing upon one anothers' shoulders, and just as Natsatt turned around he saw a dusky head appear over the top of the fortification. Quickly raising his musket he fired before the venturesome intruder had time to notice his movement. There was a cry of agony, followed by a heavy thud upon the ground. Instantly wild yells ensued. No longer were the Chilcats silent in their assault. With savage determination dozens of them began to scale the wall, while others hewed fiercely with their hunting-axes upon the strong door.

The two lone defenders took up their stand part way between the building and the barricade. Whenever a head appeared over the top of the wall it became the target for an unerring marksman. But this could not last long. It was impossible to reach the natives who were hewing at the door, and from the sound of blows, and the splintering of the wood it was apparent that only a short time could elapse ere an entrance would be made.

The Chilcats seemed to realise that something was wrong within the Post. Just what it was they could not tell. But the slackening of the fire gave them greater courage in their desperate assault.

"This is getting hot!" Dan exclaimed, as he rammed down the wad of paper upon the powder he had just poured into the barrel of his musket. "I knocked that fellow off, but there are dozens more to take his place. That door will soon be down, and then it will be all up with us."

"Let's get out," Natsatt replied. "There's the canoe, and it's our only hope. You take what grub there is left, and I'll look after Owindia."

"We can't do it, lad," the Ranger responded. "The devils are at the very water's edge, and would shoot us down in a twinkling if we try such a thing. No, I'd rather stay where I am than be pumped full of holes in the canoe. We can settle a few of them before they knock us out, and that'll be some satisfaction. But, Good Lord! the door's down! Let's at them."

Dan's words were only too true, for with a crash the barrier gave way, and with wild yells of triumph a score of Chilcat warriors leaped through the opening straight toward the two defenders.

CHAPTER XXIII

THE FETTERED CHIEF

KLITONDA firmly believed that Klota's spirit had visited him in the Chilcat camp, and freed him from the tree. With all the independence of his spirit, and his hatred to the medicine man, he could not easily free his mind from the teaching of childhood. He still held many things in common with his own people. To him there were spirits of air, earth, mountain, and water. He also retained his belief in his special guardian animal, the wolf. This creature was his totem, and aided him in the chase. Seldom had he ever killed a wolf, and to eat its flesh was something not to be thought of for an instant. A figure of a wolf's head he had carved with much labour and care upon the bow of his canoe, the handle of his hunting-axe, his bow, and in fact upon almost everything he possessed. If he had special success in the chase he somehow felt it was due to the good wishes of his totem; but if he took few pelts he believed that his guardian animal was against him. It was, therefore, only natural that on this night of his deliverance from his enemies the superstitious influence of generations of ancestors should strongly possess his heart and mind.

To Klitonda the voice which he heard was the voice of his lost Klota. Who else could it be there in the very presence of the Chilcats? Never for a moment did he think of Owindia. He had left her sometime before near the Post. How could she know that he was a captive bound to a tree? But had he known it was his daughter who cut the thongs not a step would he have taken from the place. He would either have carried her off bodily, or died fighting by her side.

Ignorant of who had really freed him, the chief sped away from the camp with remarkable swiftness. There was no trail to guide his steps, and in truth he needed none. He threaded the forest darkness as surely as if on a well-beaten path. A natural instinct directed him, which he had in common with the beasts of the forest, and the birds of the air. He at once set his course not back to the Post but far away westward to where he believed the Ayana Indians were encamped.

Klitonda's hands were still securely bound behind his back. He tried several times to rend asunder those gripping thongs, but in vain. His arms ached from their cramped position, and the fetters were cutting into his flesh so hard had they been twisted about his wrists. He was anxious for the darkness to pass, and often glanced eastward for the first faint light of dawn. It seemed to him a long time in coming, and when at length he beheld the sky reddening away on the horizon an expression of pleasure might have been detected upon his face. Slowly the sky brightened, and the darkness faded. The light tinged the mountain peaks, and stole quietly down to the valleys below. The long silent reaches of the great forest felt the touch of dawn, and awoke to life and action. Birds twittered sleepily among the branches and the squirrels began a new day of activity and chattering. Occasionally a belated rabbit scurried through the underbrush on its way to its secret burrow.

Klitonda was earnestly studying the various objects near at hand as he hurried on his way. Stones, small and large, arrested his attention. At times he would pause by the side of a rock and examine it carefully. Not finding what he was looking for, with a grunt of disgust he would proceed. His course at length led him to the top of a stretch of rough country, barren and bleak. A ridge of sharp rocks ran for miles north and south. Searching about Klitonda at last found a stone which seemed to suit his mind. Lying prone upon his back he brought his wrists directly over the flinty edge, and thus endeavoured to saw through the tough moose-skin thongs. As he could not see what he was doing, the stone often tore his hands instead of the bonds. The perspiration poured in great beads from the chief's face as for some time he frantically struggled to free himself. But the Chilcats knew how to tie a prisoner, and as the thongs were wound about his wrists in several coils, he found that all his efforts were in vain. At last he was forced to give up the attempt as useless. He rose to his feet and looked upon the stone. It was covered with his blood, and what had he gained? The sight before him, and the pain he was now enduring aroused him to almost maddening frenzy. He tore wildly at his bonds until the muscles of his body stood out like whip lashes. Had not the thongs been of excellent material they certainly would have been rent asunder by the infuriated chieftain. He turned and looked back toward the Chilcat camp. No sound did he utter, but the expression of rage and hatred which glowed in his eyes was more terrible than many words. What a seething ocean of passion was surging through the heart and mind of that native of the wilds as he looked. The indignity of the past night, the wrongs and insults of former years all came upon him with titanic might. He was standing upon a rock, and his appearance at that moment was more awe-inspiring than ever. He was the giant of his race, fighting a battle against overwhelming odds. He was a Promethean warrior, bound in limb, but free and unfettered in spirit.

Turning at length he left the place of his defeat, and moved with a quickened pace on his way. The fire burning in his heart was now at white heat, and he needed action as a vent to his feelings. The sun came down the valley, and poured its beams upon his uncovered head. The air became stifling, and his throat dry and parched. He neared the little stream where the Chilcats had fallen upon him. He almost scented the water some distance away. Cautiously he approached, and looked apprehensively around as if expecting to be again set upon. The water sparkled before him, but ere tasting a drop he looked eagerly around for the tokens he had dropped the day before. They were there just where he had left them, having escaped the keen eyes of his Chilcat captors. He let them lie where they were, and turned toward the little brook. How good the water looked to this thirsty chieftain as it purled on its way through a wilderness land. Along its banks the grass grew, and wild flowers rioted in profusion. How often had the wild beasts found their way to this stream to slake their thirst. Klitonda, too, had knelt at that very place and touched his lips to the water. Once he had camped right near. Klota was with him then, and Owindia was a little baby. After he had stooped down with much difficulty and satisfied his thirst he sat for a while upon a stone partly embedded in the earth. He was thinking of that day, which now seemed so long ago. He remembered how Owindia had laughed with delight as she pointed to the brook, and tried to tell them what was in her mind. They had reclined upon the ground watching her with much pride. Since then what clouds had swept over his life. Klota was gone, and the Chilcats were in the land more terrible than ever. The fierce light had faded from his eyes, and a gentle expression had taken its place. But as he thought about the Chilcats the old feeling of revenge and hatred returned. He sprang from the rock, and stepped to where the arrows were lying. He was the chief of the mountains again, the implacable enemy of the Chilcats.

He looked at the tokens before him, tied firmly together with several sinews, by Owindia's deft fingers. He could not lift them with his hands, so stooping he seized the cord with his teeth. In this manner alone could he carry them, so without another moment's hesitation he sprang up the slope, leading from the brook, and sped along the trail.

The sun rode high in the heavens, and then dipped away toward the west as Klitonda paused upon the brow of a steep hill. He knew that his destination was not far off. The scent of a mountain lake drifted to his sensitive nostrils. The chief's mind was somewhat uneasy. What if his people were not there? Suppose they had not yet arrived? He knew how many lakes there were, and at times it was uncertain where the largest band of Indians would be gathered. He thought of Owindia, and what might happen to her and the white men should he have to go farther afield in search of the Ayana. The distance was long as it was, and it would be necessary to make haste.

Descending the slope with much swiftness he at length came in sight of a large lake lying before him like a precious gem in its dark green setting of fir and spruce trees. Around the edge of the water ran a shadowy fringe where the silent forest border was mirrored in those clear liquid depths. Not a ripple disturbed the glassy surface of the lake, and not a sound could

Klitonda hear. He was fearful lest the Indians were not there. Approaching cautiously he soon obtained a better view of the shore just below the slope. Then he beheld several thin columns of smoke rising up phantom-like into the still air. His people were there! He moved somewhat nearer that he might observe them. It was possible, he thought, that a band of Chilcats might be fishing in the lake, and so he must be on his guard. Then he wondered if the Ayana would welcome him. If the score of hunters who had given him the tokens were there all would be well. But suppose they were absent!

Creeping still nearer, and crouching behind a thick low-set fir tree he was able to look right down upon the camp. That they were his own people he soon observed, and the discovery sent a thrill of satisfaction through his heart. He watched them for a while ere going down to join them. There was a large number present, men, women, and children. It was supper time, and they were cooking fresh fish over the coals. The appetising smell was wafted up the slope and made Klitonda realise how hungry he was. He had eaten very little since leaving his own lodge by the Post. Children were playing quietly along the edge of the lake, and the hunters were lying upon the ground. The women alone were working. It was a scene of peace and happiness, such as Klitonda delighted to look upon. A feeling of pride came into his heart. They were his own people, and he was their chief. Soon the invaders would be driven out, and no longer would the Ayana be fearful of their ferocious enemy. They would dwell in peace, plenty, and safety.

Having observed them for a few minutes Klitonda left his hiding place and hurried down to the camping ground. His sudden arrival caused considerable consternation among the Indians. They gathered around him and gazed wonderingly upon their bound chief, and his bleeding hands. No questions were asked, and in truth they were not needed. They knew only too well what had happened, for who could bind their mighty leader but the Chilcat wolves.

Klitonda's gaze roved swiftly over the hunters. He saw a number of the young men who had given him the tokens. He said not a word but going to one dropped the arrows at his feet.

"Cut the thong," he demanded.

"Take the tokens," he continued, when the young man had complied with his request.

"Give them to the rest of the hunters," he ordered. "Show them the blood marks upon them. They will know the meaning."

Silently the chief's orders were obeyed, and out of the score of arrows thirteen were delivered.

"Where are the others?" Klitonda asked.

"At the Great Lake," was the reply. "Two sleeps from here."

Then one of the hunters seized his knife, and stepping up to the chief was about to cut the thong which bound Klitonda's hands. But the latter drew back, and shook his head.

"Wait," he said. "Do not free your chief yet. Listen to what he has to say. The Ayana Indians see these bound hands. Do they know who did it? Do they realise that the Chilcat dogs are in this land, and did this deed? The spirit of Klota came to Klitonda when he was tied to a tree and gave him liberty, and he has come to his own people. The sun shines, the streams run through the land, and the birds fly in the air. They are free, but the Ayana people are slaves. How long will this last? The time has now come, and Klitonda calls the Ayana warriors to arouse, and drive back the Coast dogs. The white men will help them. Look upon your chief's hands bound and covered with blood. Klitonda is tired; he has come a long way. He is hungry. But do not give him any food, do not give him a place to rest, and do not cut the thongs which bind his bleeding hands unless the Ayana warriors will follow their chief. He will not stay, but will leave this camp. There are warriors here who will come with him," and he looked upon the thirteen young hunters as he spoke, "but they are not enough. Some of them are away, and cannot get here in time. Who among the rest will take those blood-marked arrows, and follow Klitonda?"

There was deep silence for a brief space when the chief had finished speaking. The hunters looked at one another as if to know who would be the first to make a move. Presently one sturdy young brave stepped forward, picked up a token, and walking over stood by the side of the thirteen pledged warriors. He was immediately followed by another, and then another until soon all the arrows were taken. A keen interest now pervaded the entire camp. The bound chief, and the response of the young men for service had a deep effect upon all. Hunters who were reclining upon the ground felt their hearts thrill as never before. They saw, too, the eyes of the women turned upon them in a half-pitying, reproachful manner. They became ashamed of their own cowardice and inaction. Rising to their feet several made their way to the side of their chief. Others followed their example, and in a few minutes every young hunter in the camp had signified his intention of following Klitonda in his great march against the Chilcats.

CHAPTER XXIV

OUT FROM THE HILLS

WHEN Klitonda saw what had happened and that thirty warriors were ready to follow him against the Chilcats, a smile of satisfaction brightened his face. His heart was lighter than it had been for months. After years of waiting and hard work something had been accomplished. With thirty men to support him, aided by the whites, he believed that the enemy could be defeated and driven back crushed. He at once gave the order to have his hands freed. When the thongs were cut he looked upon the blood upon his wrists and knuckles, and stood for a moment in silence. Then he glanced toward the water as if intending to wash away the stains.

"No," he said aloud, "let the blood stay. There will be more blood upon them before the sun is high again in the heavens. Let the blood of the Chilcats mingle with that of the chief of the Ranges."

Klitonda's hands were numb from their cramped position, and it was some time ere the full feeling returned. He ate the meal which had been prepared for him, at the same time talking to the men who were gathered near. He had much to say to them about the white men, and his capture by the Chilcats.

"The Coast dogs are many," he said in conclusion, "and they will not easily be beaten. Great care must be used, and the hearts of the Ayana warriors must not fail. Now is the time of struggle. Now is the only chance left of freeing our land from the invaders."

Supper ended, Klitonda asked for weapons; bow, arrows, and axe. His own had been taken by the Chilcats. Several bows were brought, and when the chief had tested them he found they were all too weak for his powerful arm.

"Are these the strongest?" he asked. "Klitonda cannot use them. He must have a bow like the one he lost. He cannot go into battle with such as these."

His men looked at one another, but made no response. Then an old squaw, who had been listening intently to the conversation, entered a brush lodge nearby, and shortly returned bearing in her hand a bow larger than the rest. It was seven feet in length and big around at the middle as a man's arm. It had been carefully made, and was partly wound with the finest of caribou sinew. She held it out to Klitonda who received it with surprise.

"Where did this come from?" he asked, as he examined it, and felt its smooth surface. "No Ayana warrior ever bent such a bow as this."

"It was used by my father's father," the old woman replied. "He fought with it at the great Tagish battle when the Ayana were defeated by the Chilcats. He died with it in his hand. Nasheesh was a little girl then, and her mother gave it to her. It was found on the battle-field after the Chilcats had gone away. It was a strong arm that bent that bow, and no one has used it since my father's father died. Let the chief now try it."

"Klitonda will see," was the reply. "Bring the strongest sinew in camp for the old one is weak."

After some delay the bow was fitted with a twanging cord, and the longest arrow chosen. Then Klitonda grasped the bow, and standing erect drew the arrow full to the head, and sent it straight to the limb of a tree fifty yards away. The slender twig trembled for an instant, and then fell to the ground, severed as if by a keen knife. A murmur of admiration rose from the onlookers. Never before had they realised the strength of their chief's arm, although they had talked much about it.

"It will do," Klitonda said, as with much satisfaction he looked around upon his men. "As this bow saw the defeat of the Ayana in the great Tagish battle may it soon see their victory against the Chilcats. But come, it is time to be on the move. The day is almost gone, and the night is all too short in which to reach the Ayan River."

"But is not the chief weary?" asked one of the men. "Will he not take a little sleep first?"

"Klitonda will not sleep," was the emphatic reply. "He will not sleep until after the battle. And if he sleeps then it will be only as a conqueror. If not as a conqueror he will sleep with his own people in the Happy Hunting Ground."

The next question to be settled was the route they were to follow. To go by the way of the trail over which Klitonda had recently travelled would take too long a time, and the warriors would be weary after the difficult march. The alternative route was down the swift river leading from the lake, and thence down the Segas River to the Post. By this they could make much better progress, and reach the Great River by early dawn. It did not take them long to decide upon this latter route, and then preparations were made for a speedy departure.

Darkness had deepened over the land as two canoes left the shore and pointed straight across the lake. There were no cries or murmurings from the women, children, and the few old men who were left behind. It would be unbecoming on their part to make any lamentation, and thus weaken the hearts of the warriors. But as those left behind stood upon the shore until the canoes had disappeared from view, they felt that they had seen the last of their sons and husbands who had gone forth on behalf of their land.

With much skill the Indians guided their canoes down the swift and dangerous stream. There were rocks to avoid, and in one place they had to shoot a foaming rapid. But at length all was passed and in about an hour's time they swept out upon the less dangerous Segas River. They now settled down to hard paddling. The current was fairly swift but not swift enough for the leader who longed for the wings of eagles that he and his men might fly over the forest straight to their destination.

Thus hour after hour they bent to their paddles and in grim silence advanced. Klitonda's thoughts were with Owindia. What had happened to her? he wondered. Was she at the Post? Had the Chilcats made the attack, and if so what was the outcome? Would they be in time? He believed that the assault would be made at night, and if the white men could keep back the Chilcats for a while they might be able to get there before the end came.

The two canoes were in mid-stream, and the banks lined with thick trees were in complete darkness. They did not see, therefore, a canoe drawn upon the shore on their right as they sped by, nor the forms of several men crouching among the trees. Had they known that the deserters from the Post were there waiting with almost bated breath until the unknown canoes had passed, Klitonda would no doubt have forced them to give a quick account of their strange actions. But they knew nothing of what had happened so continued on their way. Hardly a sound did they make as their paddles cleaved the water. Slowly the night wore on and edged into the dawn of a new day, a day which was to mean much for the Ayana people. The trees along the shore became more distinct, and stood shivering from the coolness of the night and the filmy mist which hung like a long thread over the stream. The still weirdness of early morn exerts a peculiar influence upon the heart. It is the time when all the little creatures of forest and air are silent, and the quietness seems to portend future events. It affected the superstitious hearts of the Indians in the canoes. They knew that shortly the Post would be reached, and the struggle with their merciless foes could not be delayed much longer. It was only natural that the paddles should not move with their former swiftness, and that a number of the men should have grave doubts as to the wisdom of the undertaking.

But no such thoughts disturbed the mind of Klitonda. His paddle never for a single moment ceased that mighty sweep which his gigantic arm alone could give. He appeared to be tireless. After what he had experienced it was wonderful to his men how he could continue paddling hour after hour the freshest one of them all. An expression of great determination lighted his face. His eyes gleamed with a far away look. He was fighting the battle with his enemy. He was dealing terrific blows, and levelling the Chilcats to the ground long before the Post was reached.

At length he gave the order in a low tone to run the canoes ashore, and when all had disembarked he gave his men a few words of instruction. He did not consider it advisable to go down into the open and thus expose themselves to the Chilcats should they have taken possession of the place. They must separate into three bands, and spread off into the forest, and thus come up behind the enemy in three different directions. By this manœuvre Klitonda hoped to frighten the Chilcats into believing that a very large band of Ayana Indians had come up against them. Having given careful instructions to his men Klitonda chose five to go with him, and the rest were sent over toward the enemy's camp. At once Klitonda with his followers struck straight through the forest for the Post. They had not gone far ere a faint sound fell upon their ears, which brought them to a sudden stand-still. They looked at one another, and without a word sped forward. Well did they know the meaning of that sound. The attack had been made and they would be in time. A feeling of exultation thrilled Klitonda's heart. The spirit of generations of warriors was beating within his breast. He longed to be at his enemy, to have a hand in the fight. It was the wild volcano of rage and hatred which had been threatening for so long, which had now burst forth. No longer could it be restrained. His blood was up, and what to him were a thousand Chilcats? His companions could not keep up with their hurrying chief. His feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground. The sounds of shooting became much more distinct as they advanced.

Reaching the edge of the forest Klitonda became more cautious. He peered forth from among the trees, and seeing the Chilcats swarming at the gate of the Post the truth flashed upon him in the twinkling of an eye. They had broken down the barrier and were upon the white men. The sound of shooting had ceased, but he could hear the savage yells, and at times cries of pain. His men were by his side now. Quickly fitting an arrow to the sinew he drew the bow to its full capacity and sent a missive of death right into that scrambling band of Indians. His companions did the same, but their arrows fell short of their marks. A yell of pain and surprise followed Klitonda's shot. The Chilcats looked toward the forest and as they looked, from two other directions came a rain of arrows, most of which found lodging in the bodies of the besiegers.

The Chilcats now made a wild rush for the cover of the forest, and as they hurried across the open were met by another shower of arrows from the concealed Ayana warriors. But some remained at the Post, and hoped to find shelter behind those wooden walls when they had overcome the two lone defenders. It would not do to let their enemy get possession first.

Klitonda, seeing how matters stood, and that the white men were being hard pressed, stepped forth from his place of concealment. He believed that Owindia was within the Post, and now that the gate had been battered down she would be in great danger from the Chilcats. He surmised that the defenders were hard pressed as they were doing no shooting and seemed to be engaged in a hand to hand struggle with their opponents. With a call to his men to follow he dashed across the open, and with axe in hand fell upon the struggling Chilcats. So sudden was the attack that for a minute the besiegers were taken by surprise, and daunted by the towering form which had leaped so suddenly upon them. But the fear was only temporary, for when they recognised the chief of the Ayana they gave a yell and turned upon him.

Klitonda had only his axe in his hand, but as his enemies rushed toward him he levelled them one by one with the terrible sweep of his right arm. They came two and three at a time, and fearful was the struggle which then took place. Backwards and forwards they surged and swayed. Now Klitonda was forced back step by step, and again he made his opponent retreat. The ground around him was strewn thick with the bodies of dead and wounded Chilcats. Out of the dozen who had set upon him only three were at length left. These seeing how little was their chance of winning against the gigantic chief, turned and fled. One of them ere he left seized a musket which was lying upon the ground, and lifting it to his shoulder aimed it straight at Klitonda and fired. There was a deafening report. The chief staggered, threw up his hands wildly into the air and fell forward upon the ground right across the body of a dead Chilcat.

Klitonda's five companions had attempted to follow their leader to the Post. But as they were some distance behind they were met by a band of Chilcats, and so were forced to retreat to the shelter of the forest. And here amid the trees began a desperate struggle. From tree to tree they fought, both sides watching for the slightest opportunity. The Ayana fought with great bravery, and endeavoured to make every arrow tell. Ere long their quivers were empty, and they had nothing but their axes left. The Chilcats on the other hand not only out-numbered the Ayana, but their weapons were superior. Armed with muskets they were able to pour a withering fire upon their opponents. Their supply of ammunition was abundant, and they were able to keep their enemy from coming to close quarters. Could the Ayana have engaged in a hand to hand encounter even though the odds were against them they would have had a good chance of winning the fight. But whenever they appeared from behind the trees they were met by a shower of bullets. At length only two of the five were left, and they, seeing that their case was hopeless, made a frantic effort to escape. They turned to flee, but had taken only a few steps when they fell to the ground, pierced by several balls.

And the fate which befell these five overtook the rest of the Ayana. Their arrows which were soon spent could not contend with the more destructive muskets. Soon most of them were lying dead or wounded upon the ground, while only a few escaped and made their way back to the lake with the terrible tale of death and defeat. The Ayana warriors had made a determined struggle for freedom. But they had not counted upon the overwhelming power of the muskets which the Chilcats carried. Their primitive weapons, no matter how powerful, were no match for the deadly guns of modern civilisation.

CHAPTER XXV

INTO THE UNKNOWN

WHEN the Chilcats broke down the door of the barricade and crowded through the opening Ranger Dan and Natsatt sprang toward the store, and stood with their backs against the logs. Hope faded from their hearts as they saw the natives surging through the door. But they determined to die fighting hard. Two Chilcat warriors went down before the fire of their muskets, which caused the others to hesitate for a few seconds. Then with a yell of rage they rushed the two lone defenders. With their muskets raised aloft Dan and Natsatt dealt terrible blows upon the heads of their enemies. Notwithstanding the Ranger's age he was a veritable giant in battle. His great stature, and the reach of his long arms gave him an advantage over his short-limbed antagonists. Natsatt, too, was no mean opponent. Strong, lithe, and tall, he dealt sledge-hammer blows, levelling several Indians to the ground. The Chilcats wished to take these sturdy fighters alive. It would mean much to lead them as captives back over the mountains to the coast. They did not, therefore, use their muskets, but endeavoured to stun the white men with their axes. This was fortunate for Dan and Natsatt, otherwise they would have gone down in an instant.

But fight as bravely as they might it was impossible for two men no matter how strong and brave to hold out for any length of time against such overwhelming odds. The Herculean efforts they were making could not last much longer. Already they felt themselves weakening, and realised that the fight could not continue much longer. Natsatt had just knocked over a venturesome brave, and was turning his attention to another who had rushed up, when a yell was raised from those in the rear. There was a cry of pain, too, and at once the pressure lessened, and most of the Chilcats scrambled hurriedly back through the gate. The defenders had no time to ascertain what was taking place outside, for two furious natives still remained, and were besetting them with wild rage. They had been slightly wounded and were burning for revenge. The Ranger by leaping aside escaped a blow aimed at his head, and in return brought his shattered musket stock down upon the brave with such a force that the native sank helpless at his feet. Another blow and the Chilcat lay still. Natsatt on the other hand had a much harder struggle. His opponent was more cautious, and watched his opportunity to strike. The half-breed was also wary, but springing back to escape a blow aimed at him, slipped and fell sideways upon the earth. With savage delight the Chilcat leaped forward. His axe was raised aloft to strike. It was in the act of descending, when the arm which held the weapon was broken like a pipe stem by the force of Dan's musket. With a yell of pain and rage the Indian turned upon his new assailant. But he was helpless, and another blow sent him to join his companion in the Spirit world.

"Are you hurt?" Dan asked, rushing forward, and assisting the young man to his feet.

"No," was the reply. "But that was a close call. I am covered with bruises and blood, and so are you, Dan. Anything serious?"

"Guess not. Only a few scratches. But we haven't time to think about such things now. We must see what's going on outside."

Together they rushed to the gate, and were just in time to behold Klitonda fall across the body of the dead Chilcat. They saw the two braves fleeing for the forest, and then looked upon the fallen Indians lying near the chief.

"Good Lord! What a fight he put up!" Dan exclaimed. "Oh, if we had only been here a few minutes sooner we might have saved the brave chap. But let's bring him inside. Maybe there's life in his body yet."

Hurrying to where the chief was lying, they carefully examined him, and found that life was not altogether extinct, although he was bleeding profusely from the bullet wound. Lifting him up with considerable difficulty they carried him behind the fortification.

"Not in there," Natsatt panted, as Dan was heading for the Post.

"Where, then?" was the reply.

"To the canoe by the water-gate. We must get out of this. There's no time to lose. The devils may be upon us at any instant."

Without questioning these words Dan obeyed, and thus they bore the wounded chief to the river's edge and laid him carefully in the big canoe.

"Now for Owindia," Natsatt cried. "I'll look after her while you get some grub together, if there's any left."

Dan obeyed like a child, and followed the young man back to the store. The fearful struggle through which he had recently passed was having its effect upon him now. He was weaker than he had been for years, and he needed some one upon whom he could depend in the present crisis. Searching around he gathered into an old sack their scanty supply of provision, hardly enough to make one good meal for a hungry man. He had just reached the door when Natsatt came forth from the adjoining room carrying Owindia in his arms. She had hardly moved from the position she had been placed but a short time before. Natsatt's heart stirred with pity and love as he saw her lying there, with her loosened hair tossed in confusion about her face. Her lips were slightly parted, and she was breathing heavily. Her cheeks were flushed and hot, telling plainly that the fever had not yet subsided. As Natsatt stooped to lift her his face came close to hers, and upon her hot lips he imprinted a loving kiss.

"Darling," he murmured, "I must save you, and you must live. Don't leave Natsatt. How can he live without you?"

Gathering the maiden up in the blankets which were upon the cot he hurried out and met Dan. They had taken only a few steps toward the water-gate when the Ranger gave a cry of alarm.

"The Chilcats are coming!" he roared. "Quick; to the canoe!"

With a mighty bound Natsatt leaped forward, with Dan following close at his heels. He reached the canoe, placed his precious burden, blankets and all in the bottom. The craft was at once rushed into the water.

"In, quick!" Dan commanded. "The devils are upon us!"

As the craft left the shore Natsatt seized a paddle and glanced around. Coming down the long passageway he saw a score of Indians on the full run, shouting and yelling in the most terrifying manner.

"Drive her," roared Dan, "and get beyond the range of their guns. I wish my musket was loaded, I'd give them a parting salute, which one of them would feel."

Seizing the other paddle he assisted Natsatt, and soon the canoe was in the middle of the river, bearing downstream. The foremost of the Chilcats seeing their prey about to escape endeavoured to shoot them down in the canoe. In this they were foiled by the high walls which ran several feet out into the water, and by the time the muskets had been discharged the craft had dropped far enough away to be hidden from view. Had the Indians been outside the barricade they might have done considerable damage. But so anxious had they been to seize the white men, and raid the Post that all who were able had rushed within the fortification. When they realised their mistake and rushed outside the canoe was so far away that their shots would have been useless. They accordingly returned to the Post and ransacked the place, seizing eagerly upon everything the traders had left behind. They searched among the dead for the body of the Ayana chief, and were greatly disappointed when no trace of him could be found. They had hoped to find him only wounded and thus would have nursed him back to life that they might have the pleasure of submitting him to untold tortures later on.

In the meantime Dan and Natsatt had driven the canoe farther and farther away from the Post. They expected immediate pursuit, and often glanced anxiously back up the river to see if the Chilcats were coming. After a couple of hours' hard paddling and no sign of the enemy was seen they began to think that the Indians had given up the idea. There were many other things to occupy their attention. The chief needed attention, and Natsatt at length laid down his paddle and moved to Klitonda's side, while Dan continued paddling and kept the canoe in the middle of the stream. The chief was lying just where he had been placed. Putting his ear down close to his face

Natsatt found that he was still breathing. His eyes were closed, and his lips were firmly pressed together. His long hair was tangled and moist. His head was thrown back, and upon his face was that defiant expression with which he had met his opponents. Natsatt laid his right hand upon the chief's shoulder, and gave him a slight shake.

"Klitonda, Klitonda," he called. "Wake up. You are safe. The Chilcats cannot trouble you any more. Klitonda, do you hear?"

He waited and watched for a few heart beats, and then the eyes of the chief slowly opened, and looked around in a vacant manner. His lips slowly moved, and Natsatt stooped down in an effort to comprehend what he was trying to say.

"Owindia — Klota — Chilcats —" came feebly from the dying chief.

"Owindia is here," Natsatt replied, "and the Chilcats cannot harm her."

"Owindia — Klota — Chilcats — white man," Klitonda continued, not heeding the young man's words. Then his face underwent a marvellous transformation. The look of defiance faded and in its stead came an expression of triumph. He was driving out the Chilcats; he was watching them flee before his people back over the mountains toward the coast. His right arm suddenly shot out, and he partly lifted himself from the bottom of the canoe. "The Chilcats are beaten!" he cried. "They run like dogs. The Ayana, the Ayana are free! Klota is avenged — Owindia —"

He stopped short, and his eyes looked straight before him, wild and triumphant. Then his tense body relaxed, his head drooped, and he sank back into the bottom of the canoe. Klitonda, the chief of the Ranges was dead!

With a big lump in his throat Natsatt looked silently upon the face of the dead warrior. He had striven faithfully for long years to free his land from the invaders, and was this the end?

"Poor chap, it's certainly too bad," Dan remarked, resting on his paddle, and viewing the lifeless body. "He was a brave warrior, and deserved a better fate than that. Oh, if I were only young again I would bring back a regular army, and wipe those vile skunks out of existence. They'll treat the Ayana Indians worse than ever now, and they will laugh at the whites. Good Lord! my blood fairly boils when I think of them. But, then what's the use of worrying over what can't be helped. We've got enough ahead of us, I'm thinking, to occupy us for many days to come. That poor lassie hasn't stirred once since we left the Post. I've had my eyes upon her face most of the time. What are we going to do with her?"

Dan's question remained unanswered. They were in an unknown region never before entered by white men. The Ayana Indians had told them marvellous tales of the ferocity of the natives who live along the lower banks of the river. They were monsters, so they said, with hair hanging to their waists, and living upon the bodies of all Indians they could capture. Both Dan and Natsatt knew enough of the natives to realise that these tales were no doubt much exaggerated. With their guns they believed they could easily frighten them away. What concerned them most was their ignorance of what lay beyond. The wild Indians they would be willing to meet if they knew that somewhere ahead they would come to some camp or Post where Owindia could be cared for. They knew that the Mackenzie River, east of the mountains flowed north into the Arctic Ocean. This river was apparently bearing them in the same direction. Would they be borne on and on only at last to reach that Great Sea from which they could hardly expect to return with Owindia alive. She needed immediate care which they were unable to give. The river was swift, and at times it was divided by numerous small islands. They were puzzled as to which channel they should keep, but each time the canoe swept down into the main current again. No sign of Indians had they seen. Nothing but a dreary wilderness stretched around them on every side. The trees came right to the water's edge. The banks were not high here as farther upstream, but sloped gently to the river's edge. Their last morsel of food was now gone and they watched anxiously for some animal to appear upon the bank. They had caught sight of a moose swimming across the river ahead of them, but it was too far off for them to attempt to shoot it. Several bears had also been seen along the shore, but they, too, had escaped.

Thus on and on they sped throughout that long day. The sun beat upon their heads, and the flies swarmed around them. They were both weary from the strenuous ordeal through which they had passed, and longed to lie down and rest. But they did not dare to relinquish their paddling for any length of time. Toward evening they espied an island ahead, larger than any they had yet seen. The same thought occupied both their minds. In fact they had been thinking about it for some time. Occasionally they glanced toward the body of the chief lying near at their side.

"Suppose we land on yon island, lad," Dan suggested. "Guess we've got some work ahead of us. We can't carry this poor chap much farther."

"I've been thinking of the same thing," Natsatt replied. "We couldn't leave him in a better place."

Running the canoe ashore on the upper point of the island, they landed, and stretched their cramped legs. It was certainly a beautiful spot. Birds twittered among the trees, and there was an abundance of wild grass and northern flowers. It was a fitting place to leave the chief, who had such a passionate love for his country, and who gave up his life that it might be freed. Bearing the body of the Indian in their arms they brought him ashore, and laid him upon the ground at the foot of a large tree. Searching around they found a few branches, and others they cut with their axes. These they laid tenderly over the body until it was completely covered. Not a word was uttered as they performed this task of love for the fallen man. When the last twig had been deposited Dan stepped back as if to leave the place. He hesitated, and a mistiness dimmed his eyes.

"I can't do it, lad. I can't!" he groaned. "He was Klota's husband, and she must have loved him. How can I leave him here! I can't, I can't!"

"I feel the same way, too," Natsatt replied. "Klitonda is Owindia's father and what will she say when she learns that he was left here on this lonely island? No, it cannot be. We must take him with us."

Dan turned to the young man, and their hands clasped. They looked into each other's eyes, and were not ashamed of the mistiness which gleamed there. They were partners in distress. They had been tried in the fire of affliction, and had not been found wanting. Not a word did they speak as they bore the chief back to the canoe and laid the body in its former place. Ahead of them lay the great unknown. Whither would that sinuous river lead them? That was the question each was asking himself. But no answer was vouchsafed to them, and the vast wilderness kept its secret well. They were weary and hungry. How longingly they had watched for some animal to make its appearance near enough that they might obtain food.

But so far they had been disappointed. Were they to starve there in a land of plenty? Moose, bear, and grouse in the forest, and fish in the stream, and must they go without? Natsatt suggested that they should tarry there for a time while he went into the woods in an effort to obtain some game. But Dan shook his head.

"We can't afford the time, lad," he replied. "We must hurry on with the lassie, and see what's ahead of us. To-morrow if nothing comes our way there'll be nothing left but to go after game. So let's get on down stream."

Embarking, they slipped around the point of the island, and skirted the left hand shore. They had not gone far when Natsatt, who was seated somewhat astern, ceased paddling, laid his hand upon Dan's shoulder, and pointed ahead to the right. Then he lifted his musket and brought it to bear upon a fine moose standing drinking at the edge of the water. The animal had not seen the canoe, and when the report rang out it gave a tremendous leap into the air, staggered for an instant, and bounded off into the forest.

"We've lost it!" Natsatt groaned. "What's the matter with me, anyway? I was sure of that shot."

"Don't feel too badly," Dan soothed. "You hit it, and it may be lying among the trees. Let's go and see."

Running the canoe ashore where the moose had been seen, the young man sprang out and disappeared into the forest. Soon a glad shout reached Dan's ears, and following the sound he ere long gained the spot where Natsatt was standing gloating over the carcass of a large bull moose. It did not take them long to choose the choicest portion of meat from the animal. Then hurrying back they lighted a fire upon the shore, and prepared to cook their supper. How good that meat tasted to those two half-starved men. It was the first fresh meat they had eaten for days. The meal ended, their strength returned, and their courage as well. They could face the unknown now with a better heart.

"I feel like a new man!" Dan ejaculated, as he stood up and stretched himself. "A man can go without sleep for days, but only a boa-constrictor can go for months without grub, and thank heaven I'm not a serpent. We must take as much of that moose with us as the canoe can carry, for the Lord only knows when we'll run across another."

This was soon accomplished, and soon they were once more speeding on their way down that great northern waterway.

CHAPTER XXVI

REGIONS BEYOND

WHEN the dawn of a new day broke, the canoe was still sweeping on its way down the Yukon, which was now becoming much wider. During the night Natsatt and Dan had been able to obtain some sleep. They took turns at steering the craft, and did little paddling, merely allowing it to drift over long stretches of water, and around sharp bends. Their progress was accordingly slow. It was necessary for them to advance with care, as they could not tell what dangerous rocks and rapids might be ahead.

Natsatt's chief thought was of Owindia. He had wrapped the blankets closely around her, and had shifted her to as comfortable a position as possible. At times he held her hot limp hand in his, and anxiously watched her face, hoping to see some change upon those loved features. All through the day he had moistened her parched lips with the cool water of the river. She moaned much during the night, and became quite restless. Her head tossed on the rough pillow, and she would throw out her arms, thus loosening the blankets from around her body. It meant constant watchfulness on Natsatt's part to see that the coverings were replaced, for the night was chilly and a damp mist hung along the river. The short time he was asleep Dan looked after the maiden. There was nothing more they could do for her. They were helpless there in the lone wilderness. Few words were spoken during the night. But the Ranger was doing considerable thinking. The more deeply he was moved the more silent he always became. His mind was much upon Klota, and Owindia, with the same form and features, brought back old days. His life for long years had been very lonely, and just when he had found some one to live for it seemed as if she might be taken from him. Suppose she should recover, and they should get back to civilisation, then he would make up for the past. He had neglected to give Klota what was her due, but it would not be so with her only child. As he listened to her moans, and at times rose from his seat to cover her up a deep love for this poor child came into his heart. Then his hands would clench firmly together, while he made a mental vow that she should not die. When morning dawned they would drive the canoe as it had never been driven before. Surely they would meet with some human beings, whether whites or Indians, who would be able to minister to the maiden.

It was early in the morning when they ran ashore, and built a small fire, and cooked their breakfast of moose meat. It was at the mouth of a small river where they had landed. They noticed signs of an Indian encampment several rods up this stream, but no living person could they behold. The land was covered with a dense forest on this side of the river, and sloped gently to the water's edge. On the opposite side rose high hills, with heavy mountains in the background. It was a scene of grim, gaunt desolation, and the hearts of the two wayfarers became much depressed as they looked around. For themselves they did not care, but only for Owindia. They could go on and on until the mouth of the river was reached. They could die, but it was hard to see her lying there with no one to give a helping hand. Little did they know that they were the pioneers of a region which one day would be throbbing with industrial life; that the little stream which flowed at their feet would in less than half a century attract the attention of the whole world, and the word "Klondyke" would be a common household expression. They could not see that across this river, on that point of land, low, and covered with thick trees and bushes, almost like a swamp, a city would rise magic-like, teeming with thousands of gold-fevered men. But they could not see, and of what avail would such a vision have been to them in their time of necessity? Fifty years would have meant an eternity to them, and they needed help at once.

"Nothing doing here," Dan ejaculated, rising and looking about. "Good Lord, what a hole we've got into! Where are the Indians, anyway? I wouldn't care if they were devils incarnate so long as they showed up that we might learn something about what's ahead of us."

"There's nothing for us to do but to go on," Natsatt replied. "There are Indians around somewhere that's certain, and they may be down stream a bit, and perhaps we shall meet them before night."

Hour after hour they continued on their way, and it was past noon when they came to another river flowing into the Yukon on their left. They were about to pass without stopping, when a canoe bearing several Indians, darted out from behind a small point, and moved toward them. The current here was swift, and with some difficulty Dan and Natsatt swung their big canoe around and made for the shore. When the keel had grated upon the beach they rested and waited for the natives to come closer. This, however, the latter were somewhat reluctant to do. They were armed with bows and axes, which they kept in readiness for any emergency. Natsatt called out to them to approach, and made signs that they would not be harmed. He stood up in the canoe, showed his own empty hands, and pointed to his companion. Little by little the Indians drew nearer, and when they found there was no danger they ran close to the white men.

These strangers were dressed in the rough animal clothing of the country. They were taller than the Indians farther upstream, and appeared to be friendly disposed. Their speech was altogether unintelligible to the white men, and only by signs could they make known their wants. They pointed to the dead chief, upon whom the Indians looked with much interest, and talked rapidly among themselves. But when they saw the maiden they became silent, and drew back a few paces. Natsatt endeavoured to make them understand she needed assistance. They shook their heads, pointed away to the west, looked at the sun, and held up two fingers. By that it was evident that the rest of the band were two days away from the shore, back among the hills. Natsatt next pointed down the river, and then to himself and Dan. The Indians did not at once reply but held an earnest conversation among themselves. Then one took a small stick, and upon the sand made a rude sketch of a square, and around it he made a number of upright strokes.

"It's a Post he means," Natsatt exclaimed, now much excited.

"Seems so," Dan replied. "But I wonder how far."

Then he pointed down the river, and toward the sun. At this the Indians shook their heads and held up their fingers, some four, others three, and two one.

It was quite evident that they were uncertain as to the distance, and nothing further could be learned from them. After a few more signs had been made Dan and Natsatt pushed off, and continued on their way downstream. They were feeling more encouraged since they had learned that what seemed to be a Post or

Fort lay ahead. Word of the white men no doubt had been brought up the river to these Indians.

The day passed, and another weary night. The following day found them still drifting down that great stream which seemed to have no end. Then another night, and as the blackness stole around them a feeling of deep depression came into their hearts. Owindia was weaker, and moaned more than ever. She was failing fast they could plainly tell, and unless help came soon she could not last much longer. Dan had prepared for her a nourishing drink from a piece of the moose meat. He had done it the evening after they had left the Indians at the mouth of the river. It was the rich juice which he had boiled from the meat, and some of this they had forced Owindia to take. But notwithstanding all their efforts the maiden was sinking. As Natsatt watched her his heart became very heavy. How he longed for her to open her eyes and fix them upon him. Would she ever do it again? he asked himself. During the day he often held her hands as he sat by her side with bent head. Dan seeing the young man's silent grief was much moved.

"Keep up a stout heart, lad," he had said. "While there's life in her body we must not give up. That place can't be far ahead."

"I have kept up hope, God knows," Natsatt responded. "But what does it all amount to, I'd like to know. Owindia is failing, and we'll have two to bury instead of one. And perhaps there'll be three, for what will be the use of my living without her. Oh, Dan, you don't know how much she means to me. She is the only woman I ever really loved, and with her I know I could do almost anything. Why should I find her, only to lose her in such a short time!"

So far north had they now gone that the nights were becoming very short. The sun merely dipped below the horizon, and the light from the great orb was enough to illumine the whole land. Objects could be seen quite distinctly some distance away. When the sun again rose from its golden bath into which it had plunged, Dan, who was steering caught sight of something ahead which caused him to sit bolt upright, and shade his eyes with his hand. Then he called to Natsatt.

"See, lad," he cried, "isn't that a building ahead? Your eyes are better than mine. Upon yon bank it stands."

"It's the Post!" Natsatt replied, now much excited. "There seem to be several buildings. Let's drive the canoe, and get there as soon as possible."

Hope once again filled their hearts as they bent to their paddles and the canoe fairly leaped through the water. With steady work in about an hour's time they were so close to the building that they could see people moving about, and noticed smoke ascending from the large house which had first attracted their attention. It did not take them long now to reach the place. But before they arrived the bank was lined with natives watching with curiosity the coming of the strange craft. Never did faces appear so good to the two voyagers as did those dusky features appear on that summer morning. They were friendly, and as soon as the canoe touched the shore eager hands grasped the bow and drew it well up on the beach.

While the Indians were crowding around talking in a most excited manner, a tall man pushed his way through their midst, and coming forward, held out his hand to Dan and Natsatt. He was evidently the trader in charge of the Post.

"Good Lord!" he exclaimed, as he looked upon the dead chief, and Owindia, "where have you dropped from? I didn't know there was a white man anywhere south of us within two thousand miles, that is on this side of the mountains."

"We'll tell you all," Dan replied, "as soon as something is done for that poor lassie. She's badly stricken with a fever of some kind. It's the outcome of a fearful experience, and I'm afraid she's far gone. Is there any woman here who can take care of her?"

"To be sure," was the reply. "Bring her up to the house, and I'll round up an old squaw who is skilful at such work, to look after her. We must tend to that chap there in the bow, too. It's a wonder to me you didn't leave him behind."

Without replying Natsatt lifted Owindia tenderly in his arms and bore her up the bank toward the large house. The door was open, and several white men were standing near. They exhibited much kindness, and showed Natsatt where to place the maiden in a small room. Upon a cot he laid her, and breathed a prayer of thankfulness that at last she should have care and attention which neither he nor Dan could give. Soon several squaws entered, and he left them alone with his loved one.

CHAPTER XXVII

FORT YUKON

IT did not take Dan and Natsatt long to realise that this place they had reached in their dire necessity was a Post of the famous Hudson's Bay Company. There was the flag, known all over western Canada, with the three letters H. B. C. imprinted upon it. They were much surprised, for they had no idea that the Company had penetrated into this far-off region. They knew that they had gone far north in their search after the furry prize, but they had not heard that they had crossed the mountains. They looked with wonder upon the well-built houses, clean and orderly.

"So you are surprised, too," laughed the Factor, as he sat watching his visitors enjoying the first good meal they had eaten in days. "I was much astonished to see you come down the river, and you were amazed to find us here. There are no limits to the Great Company's operations these days. We have been here a little over a year, and it seems as if we are likely to stay for some time. But come, tell me where you have come from, and who is the sick squaw. We don't often see such Indian women in this country. She is certainly a prize. I am anxious to know, too, about that big Indian you brought with you."

And there in that frontier Post the story was told, of the entrance into the wilderness, the building of the Post at the mouth of the Segas River, the attack of the Chilcats, the desertion by the white men, the death of the chief of the Ranges, his daughter's bravery and sickness, and the terrible voyage down the river.

To all this the Factor listened without a word of comment. At times he allowed the pipe he was smoking to go out, and seemed to be lost in thought. So these men were rival traders he mentally commented, who will no doubt be a menace to the work of the H. B. Company. Why should he give such men shelter? How would his action appear when word reached headquarters? His silence, and the expression upon his face did not escape the keen eyes of Dan and Natsatt. They well knew how the Great Company would tolerate no interference, and how all independent traders were disliked.

"And so you began trading with the Indians on your own account, did you?" the Factor at length remarked. "It doesn't work. You need some power behind you."

"Don't misunderstand me," Dan replied. "It was not for the trade that I came into this country, but to find my only child, my long lost Klota. The trade was only a pawn in the game."

"And did you find her?" the Factor asked, now much interested.

"No. But I found her child, that poor lassie who is now lying here sick unto death. You may be offended with me, and consider me a rival trader, but for God's sake do everything you can for her. She is innocent."

In reply the Factor reached out his hand and caught the Ranger's.

"There is my pledge of good faith," he said. "We don't war against women. I honour you for what you have done, and I know my Company will say I am right in looking after you. Stay with us until we see what happens to the girl. You must rest now while I make arrangements for the burial of the chief."

Two days passed during which time Natsatt and Dan recovered much of their former strength. It was a time of suspense, for Owindia's life still hung in the balance. The Indian women were good nurses and did all in their power for the sick girl. They understood the nature of her trouble, and administered medicine made from the roots and bark of trees. These simple remedies had been used among this people from time immemorial with satisfactory results.

Natsatt kept almost constant watch by Owindia's side. He could not bear to be absent from her for any length of time. Dan, too, would often sit near, and study the drawn face lying upon the pillow. The day of their arrival at the Fort was the first time he had noticed the slender chain around the maiden's neck.

"Where did she get that?" he asked Natsatt, who was sitting near.

"It was her mother's," was the reply. "Klitonda gave it to Owindia the night Klota was killed, and she has worn it ever since. There is a locket attached to it. She believed it was a charm, and had power to keep away evil. She showed it to me once."

"What's in the locket?" Dan queried.

"Her mother's picture."

"Let me see it, quick," and Dan rose to his feet as he spoke. "Yes, it's my darling child," he murmured as he opened the locket which the young man had handed to him. "I gave it to her, and well do I remember the day. How happy she was, and she gave me such a loving kiss. Little did I think then when I should see it again, for it was just before I lost her."

The second night Natsatt was sitting alone by Owindia's side. Dan was to relieve him later on. It was near the hour of midnight, and a deep silence reigned within and without the building. The one small window in the room was open, and the fresh air was drifting in from forest and river. To Natsatt there seemed to be no change in Owindia's condition. For days he had been waiting for her to open her eyes and look upon him. To-night he felt more depressed than ever. He had waited so long, and his hope of her recovery was growing less each day. As he sat there he thought of the happy days they had been together, and of their first meeting in the lodge in the wilderness.

He recalled how sweet was her voice as he listened to her as he lay by the fire the morning after that great storm. Was that voice to be silenced for ever? he asked himself. Would he never hear it again? He remembered how delighted she had been as he played upon the mouth-organ. The thought brought to his mind the little instrument which he had not touched for days. Thrusting his hand within his jacket where he kept it safely concealed, he brought it forth, and fondled it for a few minutes. Then the old longing came upon him, and placing it to his lips he began to play a soft, low tune. It was like magic to his drooping spirits, and affected him as it had always done in days gone by. Tune after tune he played, unheeding how the time was passing. In the midst of a sweet air he happened to glance toward the bed, and immediately the music ceased, and the instrument dropped from his mouth. There by his side was Owindia, with eyes wide open looking straight into his face. A great joy leaped into his heart, as he leaned over and took her wasted hand in his.

"Are you better, darling?" he asked.

A faint smile appeared upon her face, and her eyes roved about the room with a puzzled expression.

"The Chilcats!" she whispered. "Where are they?"

"Hush, darling," Natsatt replied. "Do not talk now. You are safe. The Chilcats cannot harm you any more, so go to sleep."

With a deep sigh of relief Owindia closed her eyes, and was soon off into a calm refreshing slumber. Natsatt watched her for a few minutes with a great joy and thankfulness in his heart. He wished to tell some one of the good news. He must speak and let others share his happiness. He rose to his feet to leave the room to arouse Dan. But as he turned there stood the Ranger at the door. The sound of the music had awakened him, and he had come to see what was the matter. He had just reached the door when Owindia opened her eyes. He had said nothing, but had remained a silent witness of it all.

There was no sleep for these two delighted men that night. They now knew that the crisis was passed, and with care Owindia would recover. They sat and talked in subdued tones about their plans for the future. Hitherto they had been silent concerning this subject. Now, however, it was different.

As the days passed Owindia made steady progress. Ere long she was able to leave her cot, and take short walks out in the fresh open air. Natsatt was always with her, and supported her feeble steps. She was much interested in everything she saw. The Post was a wonder in her eyes, and she asked Natsatt if the houses beyond the mountains of the rising sun were anything like it. The Indians, too, were different from any she had ever seen. They were kind to the sick girl, and were always pleased when she came to visit them in their lodges. They had heard the story of her terrible experience among the Chilcats, and had discussed it among themselves. The white men of the Fort were pleased to have the sweet-faced, gentle maiden among them, and treated her with the greatest courtesy. Natsatt mentally noted how different was their treatment of Owindia from the men who had deserted the Post up river. The Factor became fond of the maiden, and when he found that Natsatt was her lover he heartily congratulated the young man. Thus their stay at the Fort was most pleasant, a blessed relief after the terrible experiences through which they had passed.

But notwithstanding her happiness with Natsatt there was a cloud upon Owindia's mind. She longed to know about her father. It had been thought best not to tell her about his death until she was stronger in health. Several times her question had been evaded. She had learned something about the defeat of the Ayana, and the attack upon the Post. A fear pressed upon her heart, that something had happened to her father. She brooded over it by day, and would lie awake at night for hours wondering what had become of him.

One day as she and Natsatt were walking along the bank of the river, talking and gathering wild flowers, they sat down in a quiet little spot under the shelter of a large fir tree. The water of the Yukon flowed swiftly past, and fascinated Owindia. She could not keep her eyes away from that stream, and became unusually silent.

"What is it, little one?" Natsatt asked, noting her pre-occupied manner. "Are you not feeling well to-day? I hope nothing is the matter, for we are planning to leave this place next week. Boats of the Company are to start up the Porcupine River with their loads of furs, and they have kindly offered to take us with them. You will then be able to see what the world is like beyond the great mountains. I hope you will be able to go."

"I am feeling stronger every day," Owindia replied. "I have heard that we are to go, and I suppose I shall never see this river again. But when I look upon it I feel sad. It was by its side so far away where I played as a little child, and my mother used to sit near and watch me. Her grave is far up there," and she threw out her left arm in an eloquent gesture. "It was there that the Chilcats tried to steal me away, and my father saved me. How he loved me, and would do anything for me. Tell me, oh, tell me, Natsatt, what has happened to him."

For a while Natsatt was silent, and sat gazing steadily before him out upon the river. How could he tell her? He had been dreading that question for days, and now it had come and had to be answered. Owindia noticed his silence, and with the quick intuition of her race divined the meaning.

"You do not answer," she breathed, while a deep sigh escaped her lips. "You do not wish to tell me what you know. But I know now, as if you spoke the words."

"I did not wish to see you grieve," Natsatt returned. "You were so weak that if I told you it might do you harm. The truth was kept from you because I love you so. Don't you believe me, darling?"

"Oh, yes, I know you love me. But I am stronger now, and want to hear everything. If my father is dead I know he died like a true warrior."

"Indeed he did," Natsatt replied. "He fought bravely to the last. You should have seen the bodies of the dead and wounded Chilcats lying on the ground. The Coast dogs would have been defeated if the Ayana had been armed with muskets, but they could do very little against the guns."

"And did you leave my father where he fell?" Owindia asked. "Are you sure he was dead? Perhaps he was only wounded, and the Chilcats have taken him away to torture him. The thought is terrible."

"No, we did not. We brought him with us, and he died in the canoe on our way down the river. His last word was about you."

"My poor father," and Owindia sighed as she spoke. "How hard he struggled to free his land, and now it is all over. The Chilcats will be more cruel to the Ayana than ever. Perhaps it is just as well that my father is gone. His heart was always heavy, but I am sure it would break if he were alive to see how his people will be treated. They will never have courage to rise again to free their land."

Her head drooped, her bosom heaved with the intensity of her emotion, and the tears began to steal slowly down her cheeks. Natsatt placed his arm around her in an effort to soothe her. Her form shook, and her sobbing increased. Her lover let her weep, well knowing that the tears would relieve her surcharged feelings, and that she would feel better after the storm of grief was over.

"Would you like to see your father's grave?" Natsatt at length asked.

"What! did you bring his body all the way to this place?" and Owindia lifted her tear-stained eyes to his face.

"Yes. We could not leave him behind. We knew how badly you would feel."

Without another word the maiden placed her hand in his, and rising, he led her to the Indian burying ground on a hill back of the Post. There were many graves here, and over each one had been erected quaint shelters. Some were covered with little cotton tents, while others had houses made of logs and brush. In the midst of these was one covered with new earth. It was surrounded by neat palings, made from small fir saplings, stripped of their bark. At the head of the grave a rude cross had been erected, on which several words had been carved, telling of the chief who was lying beneath.

"Who did it?" Owindia whispered, after she had stood for a while looking down upon the mound.

"We thought you would like it," Natsatt replied. "It was Dan who made the cross, and cut your father's name upon it. People beyond the mountains put crosses over the graves of their loved ones. Dan said that though your father wasn't really a Christian he was a far better man than many Christians he knew. Some day you will learn what that cross means, and why it is placed over graves."

For some time they stood by the side of the mound, and then Owindia moved away and gathered some wild flowers she saw growing near. They were the pretty wild rose, lupin, blue-bell, and berry blossoms. These she and Natsatt gathered, and laid them tenderly upon the grave. This deed of love accomplished, and with a long, lingering glance upon the spot she would soon never see again, Owindia placed her hand in Natsatt's and he led her slowly back to the Fort.

In a few days the Company's boats were all ready for their long voyage upstream. Dan, Natsatt, and Owindia went with them. They thus turned their backs for ever upon the country which had been the scene of so much sorrow mingled with joy. And they left behind, too, Klitonda, the chief of the Ranges, who had fought a brave, stubborn fight, and like many reformers, had given up his life ere he saw the cause for which he died triumphant in the end.

CHAPTER XXVIII

AT LAST

IT was a summer afternoon late in June when a lithe canoe containing two men, cut through the water of a large lake in the great Canadian Northwest. Everything spoke hurry. It was shown in the long sweep of the paddles, and the anxious glances which the men now and then cast upon a dim headland miles beyond. The canoe seemed to enter into the spirit of the excitement, and throbbed with life as it cleaved the rippling surface. It was a bright day, and the sun poured its hot beams upon the heads of the voyagers. The whole region surrounding the lake was covered with a thick forest sloping to the water's edge. Not a sign of human life was anywhere to be seen. Birds alone made their appearance, as they darted here and there as if rejoicing over the presence of the canoe in their midst.

"Do you think we can get there in time?" Natsatt asked, as he rested for a few seconds on his paddle and looked keenly forward.

"Sure," Dan replied. "But there's not a minute to lose. If it hadn't been for that delay in the rapids we'd have been there before now."

"We must make it," and the young man again drove his paddle with great determination into the water as he spoke. "Haven't I been counting the days for months, and lying awake at night thinking of this trip, and now that we may be late is too much to stand. What will she think if we're not there?"

"Don't worry, lad," the Ranger soothed. "We haven't lost yet, and I'm good for five hours of the hardest paddling of my life. How do you feel?"

"Feel? Why, fresh as when I left home. I could paddle at top-notch speed all night long for what's ahead of us. But we must be there by eight o'clock, or much of the fun will be lost. Do you think she'll be watching for us?"

"Sure. Weren't her letters full of it, and what she would say and do when she saw us?"

"Yes, I know that, Dan. But suppose she has changed? She has been there three years now, and has learned many things she did not know before, and might not want to go back with us. Three years make a big difference sometimes, you know. If she has changed much from what she was when we came out from the Yukon I shall be greatly disappointed. I can never forget that journey, for it was the happiest period of my life. We were a long time on the way according to the calendar, but very short to me. How bright and happy she was, and everything she saw was so full of interest to her. My, it was hard to leave her, and not see her again for three years. I don't know how I had the courage to do it."

"It was for the best, lad," Dan quietly remarked. "She, I trust, has gained much, and so have you. You've obtained a good foothold now in the country, of which any man might be proud. You've got much to live for."

"But I could not have done it without your help, Dan," Natsatt replied. "It's been a hard struggle I know, but what could I have done without you, and the thought of Owindia to urge me on. Sometimes when I was about discouraged the thought of her would come to my mind, and I said to myself, 'If I fail what will she think?' and that idea always filled me with new determination."

"She has meant much to both of us, lad. I was an old man when I crossed the mountains, and believed that my time was almost up. But when she came into my life it made all the difference in the world, and now I feel almost as young as ever."

"And you don't think she'll be much changed?" Natsatt queried. "You think she'll be glad to see us, and not be ashamed of our rough ways? If I thought she would I'd not go near where she is."

"Don't be a fool, lad. You're only talking nonsense. What kind of a woman do you think she is? Do you imagine she'd be untrue to her best friends? Not a bit of it. She's not like those skunks who deserted us in our time of need at the Post on the far-off Yukon River. They got their desert, though, when they went down in the Liard River. It served them right. No men could do what they did and get off scot free. But Owindia's not like them. Oh, no, don't you have the least fear about her."

Thus through the long afternoon Dan and Natsatt conversed upon the one subject which was so near their hearts. They had changed somewhat in the three years since they had left Fort Yukon on their journey eastward with the boats of the Hudson's Bay Company. The Ranger looked older, and his hair was whiter than ever. But in his eyes dwelt an expression of peace and contentment, which formerly had not been seen there. He no longer cared for roving, but desired rest and quietness. He had Owindia upon whom he could centre his thoughts. He had her to care for, and he had tried to make up to her what he had neglected to do for Klota. Natsatt, too, had changed. He was free and buoyant in spirit as ever, but his nature had become much developed by his contact with the old Ranger. He had settled down to steady business, and his face expressed the resolve of a man who had something to live for, and who meant to succeed in life.

Twilight was stealing over the land when at length they ran out of the lake and entered upon a narrow river. They had not gone far when before them a village appeared to view.

"We're in time!" Natsatt cried, now flushed with excitement.

"Just in time," Dan replied; "with not a minute to spare."

Running their canoe ashore, and making it fast, they walked slowly from the water toward a large building standing somewhat by itself. They saw a number of people entering the door, and others on their way.

"The place will be crowded," Natsatt whispered.

"Shouldn't wonder," was the reply. "We'll slip in and sit well back by the door. Our clothes are too rough to go up in front."

It might seem somewhat strange that these two men who had faced death so often during the past years, and had endured all kinds of hardships should tremble with apprehension as they stood upon the threshold of that building. But they were not accustomed to the ways of civilisation, and felt out of place. They observed the well-dressed people who passed them, and then glanced down at their own rough garments.

The big room they entered was almost filled with men and women. There was a feeling of expectancy in the air. There was much laughing and talking going on, and all seemed in the highest spirits. The place was brightly lighted, and the walls were decorated with pictures and mottoes, while numerous flags were gracefully arranged back of the stage which ran across the upper end of the room.

"Isn't it great!" Natsatt whispered, as his eyes drank in everything he saw. "And to think that she has been here for three years. It seems like holy ground to me."

"Hush," Dan replied. "Look!"

Natsatt glanced quickly up, and there standing on the platform was a tall woman, evidently the Principal in charge of the school. She waited until the room became quiet, and then in a few words expressed her pleasure at seeing so many present. She next gave a sketch of the work which had been accomplished during the past year, and closed by saying that there would be a short entertainment of dialogues, recitations, and songs.

In a few minutes the programme began. Girls came forth, performed their parts and retired to a room at the back of the stage. Dan's and Natsatt's eyes studied every face, and much were they disappointed not to find the one whom they were longing to see. The performance was almost over, when from the side of the platform a maiden appeared, and as she stepped forward Natsatt rose partly from his seat to obtain a better view. Dan gave a half-suppressed exclamation of surprise which caused several people to turn and look in his direction. But he did not know that he had made a sound, for his eyes were upon Owindia. Natsatt quivered with excitement. He had always known that she was beautiful but never did she seem half so lovely as when she appeared before him this night. No longer was she dressed in the quaint native costume, but in a neat white muslin dress, such as all the girls in the school wore on this festive occasion. It fitted her lithe form to perfection. It would have been difficult for the most critical eye to detect any sign of Indian blood in her veins except for a slight dusky shade upon her face, and her raven black hair, combed neatly back. It was her first appearance in public and a certain degree of nervousness was noticeable in her manner. Her eyes searched the faces before her, and at length they lighted up with a pleased expression as she noted two forms sitting back close to the door. Then her embarrassment departed. She straightened herself up to her full height, and the proud spirit of Klitonda, chief of the Ranges, came upon her. Her heart was beating rapidly. It would not do for her to fail. What would Dan and Natsatt think of her? These thoughts flashed through her mind in the twinkling of an eye. Then she opened her lips and began to sing. As her clear sweet voice rang through that building all whispering ceased, and every ear was strained to catch the rich sounds. And when she ceased, for an instant there was a dead silence like the stillness before a storm. Then from the assembled people came a great applause, which would not cease until Owindia re-appeared before them. This time it was a simple song she sang which her mother had taught her years before, and made a greater impression than the first. A hubbub arose when she finished and retired. People asked one another who she was, and why had they not heard of her before. They had not known there was such a voice in the school. Dan and Natsatt sat very still, and listened to what was being said. Their hearts were swelling with pride, and thankfulness. Natsatt was almost beside himself. He found it hard to keep still. He longed to rush forward and seize her in his arms. Three years since he had seen her, and now he was so near and yet so far off.

At last the programme ended with the singing of the National Anthem, and the people began to leave the building. Dan and Natsatt remained where they were, feeling very much out of place. They longed to go forward, and find the one they had come so far to see. But the aisle was filled with people and they must wait. As they sat there keeping their eyes lowered, for they knew that many curious eyes were cast upon them, a familiar voice spoke to them. Looking up Owindia was standing by their side. Her face was flushed with excitement, and as her eyes met Natsatt's a love that years, nay death could not vanquish shone strongly there. Forgotten were her surroundings. She thought only of him. He seized her hands stretched out to him, grasped them, and caught her in his arms. Gone were his old doubts and fears. She was the same Owindia he had left three years before. He held her close to his breast and tried to speak, but words would not come. Happiness such as he had never known had chained him and silenced his tongue. Neither could

Owindia speak. She laid her head upon his shoulder, and tears of joy streamed down her cheeks. The excitement of the evening, and the meeting of her lover had greatly affected her. Natsatt understood, and so did the old Ranger who stood silently by watching the two lovers. His heart was overflowing with thankfulness. He did not think of himself, but only of them. At length Owindia disengaged herself, turned to the old man, slipped her hand in his, and looked up into his eyes.

"Kiss me," she said, "and forgive me for not speaking to you before."

Then the Ranger stooped and touched his lips to those rosy ones of the maiden, the first time he had done such a thing since he lost Klota.

"There, that's better," Owindia cried. "Now you must come with me to see the Principal. I have often told her about you both, and she knows everything."

What followed seemed to those two rough frontiersmen like a dream. They were ushered into a fairy-world filled with maidens all dressed in white. Never before did they feel so awkward, and they imagined how ashamed Owindia must be of them. But she was so full of happiness that she never thought about how they were dressed. And the Principal was so kind, and made them feel so much at home that their tongues became loosened and they chatted away as if they had known her for years.

They were two delighted men who left the school that night and made their way to a hotel in the town. Natsatt could hardly wait for morning to dawn, and he lay awake for hours thinking about Owindia.

The next day preparations were made for their departure. There were many things to buy at the store, and Owindia went with them. Dan was delighted as he watched her animated face as she chose this and that piece of goods, and showed what he considered good taste in her choice. At last all was ready. The canoe was loaded with the purchases they had made, the good-byes had been said, and soon they were speeding on their way northward over the great lake. It took them several days to make this journey, and then one evening as the sun was sinking to rest above the tree tops a trading Post in the wilderness came in sight. Several houses were situated near, and as the canoe reached the landing place all the inhabitants, men, women, and children, came to the shore to give them a hearty welcome. A number of white women were present, who took charge of Owindia, and conducted her to one of the houses near by. Then all the people thronged into the little church until there was hardly standing room. Ere long Owindia entered, with Ranger Dan by her side. Natsatt was already in his place. Before them stood the missionary, and in solemn and impressive words made them man and wife.

Following the wedding came the bountiful supper which had been prepared, for so nicely had the home-coming been planned that all knew within a few hours when they would arrive. Owindia was almost dazed by the kindness which was bestowed upon her. It seemed as if she must be dreaming, and would awake to find herself either at the school or away in the wilderness among the Chilcats. But Natsatt sitting on her right, and Dan on her left assured her that it was a sweet reality.

Supper ended, Natsatt twined his arm in hers and led her into the store. She stood looking with wonder upon everything she beheld.

"Is this yours?" she asked.

"It is ours, darling," he replied. "Yours and mine. It is the largest trading Post in the north, and I have done it all for you."

"It is wonderful!" she murmured. "Oh, I am so happy."

Next he led her to a neat log house a few rods away, opened the door and entered. If Owindia gazed with wonder upon the store and cried out with surprise, she was now too much amazed to say a word or utter a sound.

"This is ours, too," Natsatt remarked, watching with delight the expression upon her face. "It was built for you. The furniture was all brought over the lake, and the women have fixed everything up while I was away. Why, they have even built a fire in the large open fireplace to make it more homelike. This is to be our cosy sitting-room. That chair is for you," and he led her into the room.

Owindia did not sit down. She gave one brief glance about her at the many things she saw, and then throwing her arms around Natsatt's neck, she buried her happy face upon his shoulder.

And there a little later Dan found them sitting before the cheerful fire, which felt good even in the summer, for the air was cool and a heavy mist was hanging over the land. And thus, ensconced in comfortable chairs, and Dan with his pipe in his mouth, they talked of the past. The men told of the building of the store in the wilderness, and the struggles which had been overcome. Their trials were now ended, and the future looked bright and golden.

"Oh, if my poor father could only be here," Owindia remarked, as she looked around her. "To think that I have such a lovely home with every one so kind to me, and he does not know it. How often I think of him, and see his grave far away in that lonely land, which I shall never look upon again."

And so the three sat and talked. They could not look into the future. There was no seer to draw back the veil and give them one brief glimpse of the changes the years would bring about. They did not know that the day would come when the Chilcats would lose their control over the great Yukon region, and that the gleaming gold would lure thousands of white people into the country. Neither could they see that the little settlement where the new trading Post which Dan and Natsatt had established would be the centre of a bustling, thriving city; that Natsatt would be one of the most prosperous business men of the place, and that among all the women none would be fairer or more beloved than Owindia, daughter of the brave Klitonda, chief of the Ranges.

THE END.

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